

Sri Lanka: Can't you see the writing on the wall

Tuesday 14 April 2009, by [ALVARO Lonán](#) (Date first published: 5 January 2009).

With hundreds of civilians killed and a quarter of a million people trapped by the current fighting, Lonán Álvaro considers the humanitarian cost of Sri Lanka's 25-year long conflict.

Contents

- [Ends justify the means](#)
 - ['If this be treachery, we](#)
-

Since New Year's Eve, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been caught up in heavy fighting between government forces and the 'terrorists', stated military objectives have fallen in the government's favour like dominoes, and many hosannas for the nation's 'valiant boys' have been sung in the country's media. Victory in the government's 'humanitarian operation' against 'terror' is finally assured says the national army's media cheerleaders - a final victory that has long been sought during decades of turmoil, death and a failed peace pact facilitated by well-meaning but, ultimately feckless, Scandinavians.

While this seemingly never-ending war has often been compared, especially recently, with another where too many people have butted heads on too little land, and had their lack of space is further disturbed by neo-fascist flights of fancy about the preordained superiority of one ethnic group over another, Palestine this isn't. Welcome to the teardrop isle: Sri Lanka.

Ends justify the means

Last weekend, on 25 January, the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS), the Sri Lankan ministry of defence, public security, law and order's so called 'official website for counter-terrorism propaganda', hailed the capture of the north-eastern town of Mullaitivu from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as the culmination of a series of significant victories by the security forces against the 'terrorists.' The MCNS went on to boast that 'the area dominated by tiger terrorists has been reduced to an area of 20 km by 15 km'.

Significant as these Sri Lankan forces military victories have been since President Mahinda Percy Rajapakse's government unilaterally ended the 2002 ceasefire agreement with the LTTE on 2 January 2008, can the government's claims that its operation has been humanitarian be believed?

Clearly, the answer to such a rhetorical question is not going to be in the government's favour. In the history of human conflict innocent civilians have always been killed and, in the last century or so,

the numbers of civilians killed has risen exponentially. Sri Lanka is no different. Whether it is the country's government or the LTTE, both sides have treated the country's ethnic groups with similar cold disdain. In other words - for both parties - the ends have always justified the means.

For more than twenty-five years, Sri Lankan civilians - Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher - as well as combatants, have been killed, tortured and otherwise brutalised in ways too many to list. Since 1983, the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE has - 'officially' - resulted in anywhere between 70,000 to 85,000 people killed. But despite the reams of reports by Sri Lankan commissions of inquiry, the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the like, no one really knows how many have been killed, disappeared and tortured.

While horrendous violence has, in recent decades, gone hand in hand with censorship - formal and otherwise - both practices have arguably been taken to new heights since Rajapakse rode a wave of Sinhalese ultra-nationalism to the presidency in November 2005. Under President Rajapakse, the Goebbelsian propaganda released by the MCNS and state media has been buttressed by a tsunami of vitriol directed at any group or person, local or international, brave enough to question the official word of the government.

'If this be treachery, we where this label proudly'

International reporters have also been banned from the war zone, except on rare guided tours by the Sri Lankan forces, and all international humanitarian agencies except the International Committee of the Red Cross were ordered out of the (then) LTTE controlled northern Vanni region in September 2008. When such practices haven't been enough to cow dissent, especially by local media workers, the latter have - literally - been put on the firing line.

According to Amnesty International, since the beginning of 2006, at least 14 media workers in Sri Lanka have been killed, while others 'have been arbitrarily detained, tortured and allegedly disappeared while in the custody of security forces.' Due to such unrelenting pressure, for their own safety, dozens of local journalists have left Sri Lanka. According to Reporters Sans Frontieres, in its annual Press Freedom Index released in September 2008, Sri Lanka ranked last for press freedom out of any democracy on the planet, 165th place out of 173 countries surveyed.

Recently, on 8 January 2009, Lasantha Wickrematunge, the indefatigable muckraking editor of the English-language *Sunday Leader*, was assassinated while driving to work. Wickrematunge wore the national heretic's badge with pride and in a self-penned editorial posthumously published on 11 January, he presciently predicted his murder. He wrote: *'We have also agitated against state terrorism in the so-called war against terror, and made no secret of our horror that Sri Lanka is the only country in the world routinely to bomb its own citizens. For these views we have been labelled traitors; and if this be treachery, we wear that label proudly.'*

Ironically, as the Sri Lankan government is winning its so-called 'humanitarian operation' against the LTTE, its efforts to maintain the canard that its forces have killed no civilians has started to unravel. Like with the dissemination of Samizdat information during the Soviet era, reports have come out in the past week about Tamil civilians killed in the Mullaitivu area because of shelling by the army and the LTTE. Unlike most previous claims in the past year, which have tended to show up just on Tamil nationalist websites or blogs, and were rarely picked up by the international media, claims of widespread civilian deaths and injuries as a result of the recent fighting have found their way to the wider world. Mullaitivu district government agent, Emelda Sukumar was quoted in a Reuter's article (published 22 January), saying *'Around 30 people died in the morning ... [And that] Personally I saw that nearly 100 people have died from Saturday up to today. More than 300 have*

been injured'.

While the Sri Lankan government currently looks set to strike a near mortal blow to the LTTE's hopes of carving a separate state, without a political solution that treats all Sri Lankan citizens as equals, whatever 'peace' emerges looks likely to be short-lived. In his final editorial, Lasantha Wickrematunge predicted that a *'military occupation of the country's north and east will require the Tamil people of those regions to live eternally as second-class citizens, deprived of all self-respect.'*

In a direct challenge to his Sinhalese compatriots, Wickrematunge further wrote: *'Do not imagine you can placate them [the Tamil people] by showering "development" and "reconstruction" on them in the postwar era. The wounds of war will scar them for ever, and you will have an even more bitter and hateful diaspora to contend with. A problem amenable to a political solution will thus become a festering wound that will yield strife for all eternity. If I seem angry and frustrated, it is only because most of my compatriots - and all the government - cannot see this writing so plainly on the wall.'*

P.S.

* From Red Pepper, January 2009:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/Can-t-y...>