

Sri Lanka's brutal war: Distant voices, desperate lives

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In his latest column for the *New Statesman*, John Pilger describes the catastrophe facing the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, whose distant voices have appealed to the world for almost as long as the Palestinians.

In the early 1960s, it was the Irish of Derry who would phone late at night, speaking in a single breath, spilling out stories of discrimination and injustice. Who listened to their truth until the violence began? Bengalis from what was then East Pakistan did much the same. Their urgent whispers described terrible state crimes that the news ignored, and they implored us reporters to "let the world know". Palestinians speaking above the din of crowded rooms in Bethlehem and Beirut asked no more. For me, the most tenacious distant voices have been the Tamils of Sri Lanka, to whom we ought to have listened a very long time ago.

It is only now, as they take to the streets of western cities, and the persecution of their compatriots reaches a crescendo, that we listen, though not intently enough to understand and act. The Sri Lankan government has learned an old lesson from, I suspect, a modern master: Israel. In order to conduct a slaughter, you ensure the pornography is unseen, illicit at best. You ban foreigners and their cameras from Tamil towns like Mulliavaikal, which was bombarded recently by the Sri Lankan army, and you lie that the 75 people killed in the hospital were blown up quite wilfully by a Tamil suicide bomber. You then give reporters a ride into the jungle, providing what in the news business is called a dateline, which suggests an eyewitness account, and you encourage the gullible to disseminate only your version and its lies. Gaza is the model.

From the same masterclass you learn to manipulate the definition of terrorism as a universal menace, thus ingratiating yourself with the "international community" (Washington) as a noble sovereign state blighted by an "insurgency" of mindless fanaticism. The truth and lessons of the past are irrelevant. And having succeeded in persuading the United States and Britain to proscribe your insurgents as terrorists, you affirm you are on the right side of history, regardless of the fact that your government has one of the world's worst human rights records and practises terrorism by another name. Such is Sri Lanka.

This is not to suggest that those who resist attempts to obliterate them culturally if not actually are innocent in their methods. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have spilt their share of blood and perpetrated their own atrocities. But they are the product, not the cause, of an injustice and a war that long predate them. Neither is Sri Lanka's civil strife as unfathomable as it is often presented: an ancient religious-ethnic rivalry between the Hindu Tamils and the Buddhist Sinhalese government.

Sri Lanka as British-ruled Ceylon was subjected to a classic divide-and-rule. The British brought Tamils from India as virtual slave labour while building an educated Tamil middle class to run the colony. At independence in 1948, the new political elite, in its rush for power, cultivated ethnic support in a society whose real imperative should have been the eradication of poverty. Language became the spark. The election of a government pledging to replace English, the lingua franca, with Sinhalese was a declaration of war on the Tamils. The new law meant that Tamils almost disappeared from the civil service by 1970; and as “nationalism” seduced parties of both the left and right, discrimination and anti-Tamil riots followed.

The formation of a Tamil resistance, notably the LTTE, the Tamil Tigers, included a demand for a state in the north of the country. The response of the government was judicial killing, torture, disappearances, and more recently, the reported use of cluster bombs and chemical weapons. The Tigers responded with their own crimes, including suicide bombing and kidnapping. In 2002, a ceasefire was agreed, and was held until last year, when the government decided to finish off the Tigers. Tamil civilians were urged to flee to military-run “welfare camps”, which have become the symbol of an entire people under vicious detention, and worse, with nowhere to escape the army’s fury. This is Gaza again, although the historical parallel is the British treatment of Boer women and children more than a century ago, who “died like flies”, as a witness wrote.

Foreign aid workers have been banned from Sri Lanka’s camps, except the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has described a catastrophe in the making. The United Nations says that 60 Tamils a day are being killed in the shelling of a government-declared “no-fire zone”.

In 2003, the Tigers proposed a devolved Interim Self-Governing Authority that included real possibilities for negotiation. Today, the government gives the impression it will use its imminent “victory” to “permanently solve” the “Tamil minority problem”, as many of its more rabid supporters threaten. The army commander says all of Sri Lanka “belongs” to the Sinhalese majority. The word “genocide” is used by Tamil expatriots, perhaps loosely; but the fear is true.

India could play a critical part. The south Indian state of Tamil Nadu has a Tamil-speaking population with centuries of ties with the Tamils of Sri Lanka. In the current Indian election campaign, anger over the siege of Tamils in Sri Lanka has brought hundreds of thousands to rallies. Having initially helped to arm the Tigers, Indian governments sent “peacekeeping” troops to disarm them. Delhi now appears to be allowing the Sinhalese supremacists in Colombo to “stabilise” its troubled neighbour. In a responsible regional role, India could stop the killing and begin to broker a solution.

The great moral citadels in London and Washington offer merely silent approval of the violence and tragedy. No appeals are heard in the United Nations from them. David Miliband has called for a “ceasefire”, as he tends to do in places where British “interests” are served, such as the 14 impoverished countries racked by armed conflict where the British government licenses arms shipments. In 2005, British arms exports to Sri Lanka rose by 60 per cent. The distant voices from there should be heard, urgently.

P.S.

* From www.johnpilger.com.

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