

# SRI LANKA

## A Country in Search of its Identity

*Oswald Firth, OMI, Assistant General*

Legend has it that this island of 65,610 sq. km. has all the resemblances of the paradise referred to in the Bible. The temperate climate, cascading water falls, rolling hills with lush tea plantations, exotic fauna and flora, sprawling rice fields, rich medicinal herbs growing in abundance, palm fringed beaches and the calm and quiet village life is sufficient proof that the legend has a foundation in reality. Today, however, that “paradise” has been transformed into one of the bloodiest killing fields of Asia.

Today, a population of nearly 21 million people who inhabit this graceful island are in search of an identity. The majority Sinhalese (74%) would claim that this is their unique home land, based on an epic chronicle, “*The Mahawamsa*,” which contains more myth than history. The 12% Tamils lay equal claims to the North and East of the country as being their traditional home land where they have lived from time immemorial and where they feel they can live in security and peace. The Muslims who form 8% of the population lay equal claim to their rightful place in the Sri Lankan society and demand equal treatment as citizens in all spheres of life.

A common Sri Lankan identity since the country gained independence from Britain in 1948 seems a far cry and a distant dream. Numerous treaties guaranteeing equal treatment to minority groups have been torn to shreds. After nearly 65,000 people from all communities have lost their lives due to an internecine war, and over one million people have been uprooted from their homes or driven out of the country in search of security, a common identity is perhaps an amorphous aspiration that will never be realized. What we are experiencing today in Sri Lanka is a “paradise lost”. The wounds created by years of hatred, suspicion, and mistrust between the communities are so deep that one doubts whether they would ever be healed during our lifetime.

### **A Flawed Independence**

While the local leadership from the three communities replaced the British rule in the Island in 1948, with the passage of time, the Tamils who were a majority in the North and the East of Sri Lanka, began to demand greater autonomy in various areas of governance, since they felt that privileges enjoyed by the Sinhalese were not equally made available to the Tamils. Provisions for the equal use of the Tamil language, equal opportunities for university education and projects for economic development for the North and East were hardly ever implemented by a government that was governed mainly by the Sinhala leadership. Political expediency had made the Sinhala leadership ignore and even deny the fact that Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural society.

Repeated requests by the Tamil leadership to be treated as equal citizens of Sri Lanka fell on deaf ears. Non-violent protests by the Tamils to obtain their just demands and political rights were often violently suppressed. Frustrations rose to a boiling point in 1983 when Tamil youth resorted to arms against the State. All attempts at resolving the crisis through negotiations have resulted in failure. Even a Cease-fire Agreement brokered by Norway in February 2002, which drastically reduced the number of deaths and set the tone for a negotiated settlement between the LTTE and the government, eventually failed because of the latter's failure to observe clauses in the agreement which called for a withdrawal of the military from private houses and public buildings, such as schools, and prevented many families in the North and East from engaging in their legitimate livelihood. Since then, both parties have not had the political will to make the Cease-Fire Agreement work, resulting in violations of the clauses of the CFA by both sides.

While answering a question put to him on Sri Lanka, the Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen observed on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2007 that Sri Lanka (at the initial stages of its independence) successfully implemented a number of welfare programmes such as free education, free health, etc., to its people which should have contributed to peace in that country. But, by taking a position of upholding exclusive status to Buddhism and Sinhalese, it isolated other sections of the society from having a sense of national identity. Now, there is no likelihood that the Sri Lankan state will go back from that position. Sri Lanka didn't realize the richness in plurality", said Professor Sen to a tightly packed audience in Oslo.

## **A Shattered Pluralist Society**

Sri Lanka, with one of the highest literacy rates in Asia, and where the four major religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity claim adherents among the 20 million population, could have served as an ideal model of inter-ethnic co-existence and inter-religious harmony. The hopes for such an ideal pluralist society in the whole of Asia are today extremely thin and even non-existent. In certain instances, religion has been transformed into a political weapon to declare a unitary and uniform state where minority ethnic and religious communities are viewed with suspicion as being pro LTTE or pro-terrorist. Any civic minded organization demonstrating in favour of peace and a negotiated settlement to the persisting crisis is perceived as anti-government and are subject to police harassment.

Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, the director of Colombo-based think tank, Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), in a discussion titled, "Sri Lanka's Elusive Peace Process – a Role for the United States Government?" at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, characterized Sri Lanka as "the worst place in the world for civilians, in the past 15 months," and spoke of the need for increased awareness for the humanitarian dimension to revitalize the peace process.

There is a saying that when elephants fight, it is the poor ants that get trampled underfoot. This metaphor fits Sri Lanka's current crisis extremely well. While the government of Sri

Lanka is at war with the Liberation Tigers (LTTE), it is the poor civilians that are either caught in the cross fire or displaced from their homes. The space for human rights violations will continue to increase, critically argued Dr. Saravanamuttu, as the parties pursue the military option, where at present, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and LTTE have become “mirror images” of each other.

## **Violations of Human Rights**

One of the most dehumanizing factors of the present phase of the war is the blatant violation of human rights on a massive scale. Hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians in the war zones have been driven out of their homes. Nearly all of them have lost their belongings and are unable to pursue their livelihoods. This is particularly true of farmers and fishermen whose working hours have been restricted by incessant curfews. Most children have been deprived of their education and some of them have been drawn into the war as “child soldiers”, both by the LTTE and factions aligned with the government security forces. Abduction and extortion have become so common that according to newspaper reports, an abduction takes place at the rate of one every fifteen minutes. The perpetrators of these crimes have yet to be identified and brought to justice. The ones abducted are mainly Tamil and Muslim businessmen and there are strong indications that the government security forces are involved at least in some of these crimes. Whenever the war intensifies civilians are being used as human shields and cases of forced resettlement without adequate security are now a common occurrence.

Another target of human rights violations have been the Universities in the East and the North. The Vice-Chancellor of the University of the East was abducted several months ago and his whereabouts are still unknown. On 7<sup>th</sup> May 2007, at a meeting attended by the Bishop of Jaffna, the Rev. Thomas Savundtanayagam, the Commander of the Army in Jaffna (the North), Major General G.A. Chandrasiri, the Vice-Chancellor of the Jaffna University, Prof. Balasundarampillai, and heads of non-governmental organizations, the Bishop called for the immediate release of four University students who had been abducted and he condemned the death notices issued to the University Staff.

There been cases where workers of humanitarian agencies have been shot and murdered. Investigations into such cases have often been prevented due to state bureaucracy. The murder of 17 workers of the international non-governmental organization, *Action Contre la Faim*, and the abduction and killing of two officers of the *International Red Cross* in broad day light are cases in point. It needs to be said that both the government and the Liberation Tigers, as well as armed factions who are roaming the country, are responsible for these numerous violations.

The most recent incident (7<sup>th</sup> June 2007) was the forced eviction, in the dead of night, of nearly 400 Tamils living in lodgings in Colombo and their being moved in buses to the war zone. Fortunately, the Supreme Court ruled this to be against the Constitution and a violation of fundamental human rights. Public uproar, the Opposition in parliament and the press played a vital role in condemning this shameful act which further justified the LTTE’s claim for a separate state. British Foreign Office Minister Kim Howells,

speaking to BBC on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2007 said, “The abductions have got to cease, the human rights abuses have got to cease... The kind of tactics that were used to clear Tamil people out of Colombo suburbs must never happen again.”

The violations of Human Rights have peaked to such a disconcerting and frightening level that all attempts have been made to prevent international agencies from investigating such abuses. Recently, security forces did not allow the UN Commissioner, Ms. Louise Arbour, to meet the Jaffna citizens on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2007, and to listen to their woes on the pretext that the Sri Lankan government had taken the necessary measures to curb any such violations. Around 2000 people were gathered near the UNHCR office in Templer Road, Jaffna since 7 AM to meet Ms. Arbour but they were chased away when she arrived there (*Lanka News*, 16/10/2007).

The fact is that “Sri Lanka has also witnessed a steady erosion of the independence and effectiveness of many of its democratic institutions including the police, the public service, Parliament, the Attorney General’s Department, the judiciary; and most recently, the Human Rights Commission and the Police Commission” (*Letter addressed by 38 Human Rights Organizations in Sri Lanka to Ms. Arbour, UN Human Rights Commissioner*, 10/10/2007).

What boggles the mind is that the government in its budget allocations for the year 2007-2008, has earmarked US \$ 1.4 billion (SL Rupees 166 billion) for defence spending (17.9% of the total budget), while allocating a meagre 5.25% for education and morsel of 6.1% for health and a scrap of 3.7% for agriculture (*Sunday Leader*, 14/10/2007). Sri Lanka, the land where Buddhism has been rooted for over 2500 years, is fast losing its identity as the land of the “Compassionate One” and is gradually degenerating into a state without a conscience.

## **A Way out of the Crisis**

A question that has been repeatedly asked is whether, after nearly 25 years of fighting between the military and the LTTE, with over 65,000 dead and hundreds of thousands displaced, there is no solution to this terrible crisis. Many attempts of resolving the crisis through dialogue have failed because there has been no political will on the part of the government to resolve the crisis. There is also intransigence on the part of the military, extremist political parties like the JHU (party of Buddhist monks) and the JVP (an extremist nationalist party), who want the crisis to be solved by a weakening or a total elimination of the LTTE, whatever be the cost to lives and property. The LTTE, for its part, has the weapons, funds from the Tamil *Diaspora* abroad, years of experience in the art of warfare and therefore is determined to fight the government till a satisfactory political solution is found. The Sinhala extreme nationalists demand a ‘Unitary Sinhala State’ with Buddhism as the national religion. The moderates would opt for a ‘Federal State’ based on a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Constitution. There are others who maintain the view that immediate external intervention, by the UN for example, is necessary to arrest the chaos, and bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. Whatever the proposed options, we Sri Lankans, with our religious leaders and political

think-tanks, will have to craft the most suitable model of governance for this country, and have the determination to make it work.

The view of President Mahinda Rajapakse, who came into power 21 months ago with a thin majority, is that the government is winning the war and that the LTTE has to be weakened before its leaders are brought to the negotiating table. For the government, this is a war against terrorism, and the violation of human rights, suppression of freedom of the press, breaking up peace demonstrations, deaths and displacement and the economic woes of the people are necessary consequences which the people should bear up till such time as the government completes its task. The question remains as to how many more deaths and violations of human rights are needed before the government achieves its objectives. In the final analysis, is it to be a Sri Lanka built on the blood and sufferings of its own people?! The government has perhaps forgotten that it is killing its own people, irrespective of whether they are Sinhala, Tamils or Muslims.

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