

Freedom Denied

The Crushing of Sri Lankan Tamils

Freelance writer and commentator Mike Cowie questions the wisdom of the West and the UN bodies to pick and choose their friends and foes. In the light of the decimation of the armed struggle of Eelam fighters, the author vehemently implores the world community to recognize the right to self determination.



So, with the war in Sri Lanka now over and the Tamils having been crushed and brought to their knees, I'd like to ask just one question: Are we happy now? With the Tamils' decades-long struggle for self-determination quashed and their dreams of an independent homeland shattered, are we fully satisfied? Should we give ourselves a pat on the back?

Because there's no denying that this result is largely due to us here in the freedom-loving West. Specifically, I'm referring to how the governments of Canada, America, Australia, and the European Union all decided to take sides in this civil war—this brutal ethnic civil war.

Not only did we impose an embargo on one side—the Tamil minority—while fully supporting the other—the Sinhalese majority—but we even went as far as to label the Tamils as "terrorists", while actively working to shut down all of their overseas funding and their ability to arm themselves. Both sides may have clearly been guilty of committing some pretty heinous atrocities, but for some reason we decided that the best thing to do was to condemn the one side, while cheering on and supporting the other. Worst of all, we sided with the wrong side.

I'm not about to try and argue that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or Tamil Tigers, were/are a cuddly democratic bunch (few liberation movements are), nor am I about to defend their use of suicide bombings against civilian targets or their forced recruitment of child soldiers. However, I will most definitely argue that the Tamils have every right to a homeland of their own on the island of Sri Lanka.

Casualties of 9/11

The truth is that by the beginning of this decade the Tamils had, in fact, already won a homeland for themselves in the north and east of the island. The two sides had fought to a stalemate, signed a ceasefire and entered into peace talks. But one very significant event on the other side of the world changed all of this—an event that had absolutely nothing to do with Sri Lanka. I'm talking about 9/11.

Mike Cowie

New York and Washington and in the rush to launch an all-out "Global War On Terror", Western countries, under intense pressure from America, took specific aim at the Tamil Tigers.

How they figured their so-called war on terror had anything to do with a civil war on a small island in the Indian Ocean is beyond me, but the consequences were devastating to the Tamil's cause. With one side in this conflict now fully armed and the other embargoed and isolated—with all of their overseas fundraising shut down—the eventual result was inevitable.

Now, 9/11 or no 9/11, picking the Sri Lankan government as "the good guys" and labeling the Tamils alone as "terrorists" was not only ridiculous when you consider the historical causes of the war (that is, that the Tamils rose up after years of oppression, persecution and some outright massacres), but it was also quite ridiculous when you consider the war crimes carried out



So, again I ask, with the Tamils of Sri Lanka losing their de facto independence of the past two decades and the Sinhalese majority once more in absolute control of the whole island, are we happy? Are we satisfied? Are we proud of ourselves for helping put the Tamils back in their place?

An Inalienable Right

Which raises an obvious question: Why do we here in the West pick and choose who has an inalienable right to self-determination (the people of Kosovo, East Timor, Ukraine, Lithuania, Slovenia, Croatia, etc.) and who doesn't (the Chechens, the Kurds, the Tamils of Sri Lanka, etc.)? And where do we get off labeling those who we've deemed undeserving of their own homeland as "terrorists"?

The armies of the nations we in the West have decided to support are often guilty of committing much worse atrocities than the rebel groups we've arbitrarily decided to label as "terrorists". It is

government forces that carpet bomb rebel-held areas. It is government forces that often wage scorched-earth policies, killing thousands—or tens of thousands—of innocents. But for some strange reason, we're totally fixated upon any and all rebel bombings.

Now if these rebel attacks are aimed at innocent civilians then there's no denying that we're talking about war crimes, but my point is that the government forces are usually far more guilty of these crimes. What's up with the hypocrisy? That's what I really want to know.

Some will say: "But the government forces never intentionally kill innocent civilians". To which I say: From Dresden to Hiroshima, and from Vietnam to Chechnya, military forces know damn well who they're targeting when they carpet bomb, or nuke, civilian areas from above.

Sikhs have often aspired for a homeland, and contemporary history has witnessed an aspirational struggle coming to an end without much to show for it. Those who dream must learn from those who tried and failed. At a time when the relevance and meaning of a nation state are fast changing and economic might is replacing political hegemony, it should be worthwhile to study how Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka engaged with the rulers in the final phase and what lessons could be learnt. Did they come near to achieving something, and then lost it? Or did they lose it because they forgot flexibility? All conflicts must be waged to find a final resolution. We bring you this book review that focusses on the final years Lankan peace process.

Nirupama Subramanian

After three decades of holding a gun to Sri Lanka's head, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has finally been defeated militarily and its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is dead. The decisive battles between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military were fought from January 2009 until the middle of May. In the three-decade existence of the group, Prabhakaran used the four spells of peace talks as R&R intervals in his ruthless and determined militant quest for Eelam, an independent Tamil state. During this period, the island's minority Tamil community, of which the LTTE claimed to be the only and true representative, was also hostage to the group. Dissenters met with a swift and brutal end.

Decline

As the title suggests, Twilight of the Tigers, released only weeks before the dramatic and violent drop-scene of a once seemingly unwinnable war, accurately predicts the LTTE's rout. Author G.H. Peiris, professor emeritus at Sri Lanka's University of Peradeniya in Kandy, traces the beginning of the LTTE's

WHAT NEXT?

The dismissal of devolution of power as a solution has dark foreboding

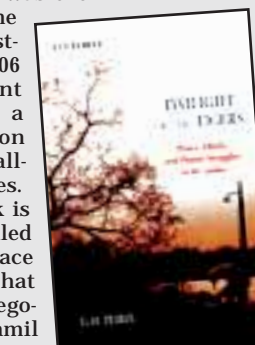
decline to the Karuna rebellion of March 2004. He points out that it was the LTTE over-reach in blocking the Mavil Aru waters to the eastern lowlands in July 2006 which forced President Mahinda Rajapaksa into a major military retaliation and eventually led to an all-out resumption of hostilities.

But the focus of the book is not this. Rather, it is a detailed study of the 2001-2007 peace process aimed to show that talking to the LTTE for a negotiated settlement of the Tamil question was an exercise in futility. For those in the conflict resolution business, there are many lessons to be learnt from this failed peace process; the book is a good analysis of a project that was doomed from the start.

Farce

Prof. Peiris calls the 2002 ceasefire, the prelude to the peace process, a "farce" based on the "illusion" that the Tigers would agree to a negotiated peace. Both sides went into it for their own reasons. At the end of 2001, the LTTE needed time to recoup losses of men and material from sustained fighting since 1999. Plus there was 9/11 and the consequent international scanner on groups designated as terrorist.

For the government, the need for a respite from war was even more intense. The country was reeling from the impact of LTTE-inflicted military setbacks and terrorist attacks. It had appeared at that time



ties. The UN now believes that nearly 7,000 civilians may have been killed, and another 13,000 injured, in just the past four to five months of the Sri Lankan army's all-out push for victory.

Twisted and Absurd

If the West's decision to pick one side in a civil war seems quite arbitrary and more than a little farcical, that's because it is. But this is nothing new and of course it's hardly limited to just us here in the West.

The Russians slaughtered at least 200,000 Chechen civilians in a few short years in a scorched-earth campaign, but—according to them, and some here in the West—it was the Chechens who were, by some bizarre form of twisted logic, the actual "terrorists" for wanting an independent homeland.

The Indonesians caused the deaths of 200,000 people over a 20-year period in East Timor, yet, according to the Indonesians, it was the Timorese who were in fact the real "terrorists".

The Soviets invaded and occupied Afghanistan back in 1979, but when the Afghans decided to resist the Russians labeled them as, you guessed it, "terrorists".

Further back, when the Irish fought a guerrilla war for their independence, between 1919-1921, they were written off as nothing but "murdering terrorists" by the occupying British, who themselves most certainly could have been tagged with that label.

And, let's not forget that, in more recent times the Americans invaded and occupied Iraq, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis, but, of course, it was those who fought back in defense of their country who were labeled the "evil terrorists".

It's really quite absurd when you stop to think about it. And this list could go on and on and...

Why do we here in the West pick and choose who has an inalienable right to self-determination (the people of Kosovo, East Timor, Ukraine, Lithuania, Slovenia, Croatia, etc.) and who doesn't (the Chechens, the Kurds, the Tamils of Sri Lanka, etc.)?

A Job Well Done?

So, again I ask, with the Tamils of Sri Lanka losing their de facto independence of the past two decades and the Sinhalese majority once more in absolute control of the whole island, are we happy? Are we satisfied? Are we proud of ourselves for helping put the Tamils back in their place?

Just because we deserve our liberty and freedom, that doesn't mean the Tamils deserve theirs, right? Again, the situation leading up to the civil war there may be well-documented and few (outside of Sri Lanka) would disagree that the Tamils had just cause in rising up, but as long as we can continue convincing ourselves that they were nothing more than sinister "terrorists" then we can go on fantasizing that justice has been done. Right? And the fate of the Tamils be damned.

Island Paradise

I should mention that during our three-year backpacking trip across Asia earlier this decade, my wife, Sonoko, and I spent

three incredible months in Sri Lanka and, while there, we made some really good friends.

Our time there on the island was unequivocally one of the greatest experiences of my life. In all the years I've spent traveling, few places have come close to Sri Lanka for sincere warmth and hospitality. The people of that tropical paradise are simply among the friendliest in the world. And that goes for both the Sinhalese and the Tamils we got to know.

Of course, every one of our Sinhalese friends would strongly oppose just about everything I've said above, but that is to be expected. As in most war zones, they have been bombarded with years of government propaganda and nationalistic claptrap and have predictably become convinced of their own righteousness and victimhood, à la America in the years following 9/11.

Tragic

Finally, let me just state the obvious: that, with over 80,000 people losing their lives, this war has been absolutely tragic. However, that doesn't mean its conclusion is any reason for celebration. The fact is that a people who have had their own homeland for the past two decades have just had it stolen away—all largely due to our unnecessary and unjust involvement.

Freedom once won is now once more denied. And this fact makes the whole brutal war even more tragic. For anyone who believes in justice and self-determination, this is a truly sad outcome indeed.

Mike Cowie is a freelance writer who writes about politics, music, film, travel, and much more. Read more of Mike's views on www.mikesandditlikes.com

Norwegian peace effort and a special chapter devoted to bashing human rights groups for raising an alarm over the killings of 17 aid workers in Muttur in eastern Sri Lanka.

But it is his other assertion that devolution of power is an over-rated political solution to the conflict that is problematic, and fills the reader with a sense of dark foreboding for Sri Lanka's Tamil community in the post-LTTE era. He has quoted from select conflict-resolution studies to buttress his contention that devolution is a "ratchet phenomenon irreversible in its directions of change, irremediable in its possible adverse consequences and... seldom... successful in the fulfillment of expectations."

Prof. Peiris evidently had in mind a situation in which the LTTE would use devolution as a stepping stone to secession. Though the book itself predicts that the LTTE would not be around for much longer, it fails to say what political solution (if not devolution) would fairly and justly meet the Tamils' aspirations after the defeat of the LTTE. He underplays the value of the Indian model, although it is one of the biggest success stories of effective devolution.

Power-sharing

The simple point is that in Sri Lanka, where Sinhalese are 73 per cent and Tamils are about 12 per cent, a centralised system with its parliamentary democracy favours the brute majority. Call it by whatever name, substantive power-sharing with Tamils is the only way forward in Sri Lanka. Yes, Sri Lanka has an alternative: to continue treating the Tamils as second-class citizens enabling the creation of another monster in place of the LTTE.

It speaks of the gulf between the two communities that Sri Lankan Tamils are liberated from the LTTE but are fearful of not having a strong voice to speak up for them any more. But then again, they have only the LTTE to blame for eliminating every possible alternative Tamil leader. (Courtesy The Hindu)