

July 1983 massacre of the Tamils by the Sinhalese – an Apology to the Tamil people from a Sinhalese

Brian Senewiratne
MA. MD. FRCP. FRACP
Brisbane, Australia

Two years ago, in a comprehensive article, '*Sri Lanka's Week of Shame - July 1983 massacre – long-term consequences*', I dealt with this blot on Sri Lanka which set the stage for the division of Sri Lanka. This is still on the web (www.tamilcanadian.com/pageview.php?ID=4260&SID=145) (www.org/taraki/articles/2006/07-28_Consequences.php?uid=1866) (www.tamilnation.org/form/brian/060723blackjuly.htm)

This year I will simply offer the Tamil people an Apology for what was done to them in 1983, and even more so, for the increasing violations of their basic human rights in the quarter of a century that has followed.

I did not slit Tamil throats or pull out the intravenous drips and throw out Tamil patients from hospital, But there is a collective guilt, a collective shame,, when members of one's ethnic group behave like savages. The only 'crime' that the victims had committed was to be born Tamil. For the first time in my life, I felt ashamed to call myself a Sinhalese. An entire ethnic group was shamed by the behaviour of Sinhala goons led by their masters in Dictator J.R.Jayawardene's government, and hoodlums in yellow robes who were desecrating the Buddha, one of the greatest teachers of Peace the world has ever known. (My mother was a devout Buddhist and her father a teacher of Buddhism and the author of books on Buddhism).

Some 3,000 Tamil civilians died that week and their homes and property burnt. Many more would have died had it not been for courageous Sinhalese, ordinary decent Sinhalese, who risked life, limb and property to hide Tamils and save them from certain death. Thank God for some decent Sinhalese. I have no doubt that some of them tendered an apology to the devastated and petrified Tamils, but the best apology was the shelter they provided at considerable risk to themselves.

The news

I was already in Australia when the massacre occurred. All I could do was to watch the horror on television. I watched with disbelief and disgust, that a country which calls itself "Buddhist", had scores of absolute barbarians, both inside and outside Government.

I had a call from London. It was from one of the finest Sri Lankans, a Sinhalese, I have ever met – Rt Rev Lakshman Wickremasinghe, the Bishop of Kurunegala, The ailing Bishop was in London but said he was returning home at once to be with his (and my) people, the Tamil people. He did; I wish I had the courage to do the same. I have regretted it ever since.

He visited the numerous refugee camps all over the island to comfort the devastated people, as Christ would probably have done. He visited a refugee camp in Akkarayan, Jaffna, with Dr Luther Jeyasingham and a close friend of mine, the irreplaceable Kandiah Kandasamy of the Movement for Interracial Justice and Equality (MIRJE). After talking with the refugees he was discovered crying in a

room. When asked, he replied that from his conversations he had found that his family had been closely linked with the violence. (The Bishop was the uncle of Ranil Wickremasinghe, a Minister in Jayawardene's government at that time and a later Prime Minister, and a kinsman of J.R.Jayawardene, the President). The Bishop died on 23 October 1983, a broken man. He never recovered from that trauma.

Sri Lanka has produced two saints – Bishop Lakshman Wickremasinghe (a Sinhalese in the South) and Bishop Bastiampillai Deogupillai (a Tamil in the North).

When Bishop Lakshman called me from London, I said that we, the Sinhalese had to apologise to the Tamils. He said he would and he did. I apologised to my Tamil wife.

The apology

In his final Pastoral Letter "*A cry from the Heart*" (15 November 1983) before his untimely death, this is what he wrote,

"We must be ashamed as Sinhalese because what took place was a moral crime. We are ashamed as Sinhalese for the moral crime other Sinhalese committed. We must not only acknowledge the shame. We must also make our apology to those Tamils..."

In a more private way, I tendered my apology. When the full horror of what happened in that week of shame, dawned on me, I sat up one night and wrote a long letter. In the morning I gave it to my wife – "This is an apology from a Sinhalese to a Tamil". I left for work. When I returned she said, "I have read it. What do you want me to do with it?" I said, "If the apology is accepted, you can throw it away". She said she would keep it. It was this which was later expanded, and published, with a Foreword from that doyen of Australian Tamils, Sri Lanka's most brilliant mathematician, Professor C.J. Eliezer who was the Dean of the Faculty of Science in Colombo where my wife and I were students in the 1950s. In the expanded version *Sri Lanka. The July 1983 massacre. Unanswered questions*, I held President Jayawardene and his murderous Ministers responsible for a carefully planned and executed massacre of Tamils and the total destruction of their economic base, which had nothing to do with the ambush of 13 Sinhalese soldiers in the North.

I believed then, and even more so now, that unless the Sinhalese apologise to the Tamils for the outrageous violation of their basic human rights over the past 50 years, there will be no peace, and certainly no peace with friendship, between the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka – divided or undivided.

It has to be a genuine apology – not the bogus apology of my cousin, the former President, Chandrika Kumaratunga, or using her political name, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.. At a meeting to mark the 21st Anniversary of the 1983 pogrom, she declared,

"Every citizen in this country should collectively accept the blame and make an apology to the tens of thousands who suffered. I would like to assign to myself that task on behalf of the State of Sri Lanka, the government, and on behalf of all of us, all citizens of Sri Lanka to extend that apology."

As I said in my earlier publication, that is not an apology, it is political clap-trap. "*Every citizen*" (that includes the Tamils – unless, of course, she considers Tamils to be non-citizens) is not to blame for the 1983 pogrom. J.R.Jayawardene and his anti-

Tamil Ministers were to blame.

"*Every citizen*" is not to blame for the wholesale massacre of Tamils that occurred in Jaffna in 1995. She, Chandrika Kumaratunga, President, Minister of Defence and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, is to blame. Had she the courage and integrity, she would have apologised to the Tamil people in the North for what she did to them.

The blame for the massacres of Tamils does not rest on "*every citizen*" but on two elite families – of S.W.R.D Bandaranaike (his wife and daughter), and of J.R.Jayawardene and his cronies. To this can now be added another, more murderous than both of the others, President Rajapakse's and their supporters among the ranks of the so-called Marxists, and the 'crazed gentlemen' clad in yellow robes.

Tracking down the criminals

Nazi war criminals have been hunted down and punished (irrespective of their age), 50 years after their crimes. There is no reason that those responsible for the Sri Lankan crime in July 1983, should not be hunted down and brought to justice.

Many of those who were responsible, J.R.Jayawardene and his hoodlum Minister Cyril Matthew, and his colleagues, and their thugs, are either dead or not traceable. Others with blood-drenched hands are very much alive and readily accessible. One is Elle Gunawanse Thero.

This yellow-robed hoodlum played a crucial role in the events of July 1983.. He was the monk who whipped up the emotions of the crowd that had collected in the Kanatte cemetery to bury the soldiers, and later fanned out to set fire to Colombo in general, Tamil homes and businesses in particular.

He then led a mob down Cotta road, Borella, armed with a list of innocent Tamils (obtained from the electoral office) who were to be wiped out. He was later seen at the Cinnamon Gardens police station, with a pistol visibly tucked in his yellow robe, demanding curfew passes. He was the man in the passenger seat of a lorry (I had the photograph), with hoodlums armed with petrol and kerosene, directing them to the Tamil homes to be burnt.

Where is he now? Exactly where he was then – opposite the BMICH on Buller's road (now Bauddaloka mawatte). That was crown property where he, like many other monks, had illegally squatted, building a small structure. With strong ties with Gamini Dissanayake, Minister for the Mahaveli, this small structure was replaced by an impressive one, with State funds and acknowledged his benefactor, calling it "Mahaveli Maha Seya". It was from here that the detailed pogrom of the Tamils was meticulously planned and executed.

And now? On 15 January 2003, this virulently racist monk, launched the "Organisation to Protect the Motherland" (OPM), to oppose the talks between Ranil Wickremasinghe, then the Prime Minister, and the LTTE, for a federal settlement. He claimed that the North and East which had been merged under Emergency Regulations in 1987, should be de-merged as the 'Emergency' had lapsed with the peace accord signed by Wickremasinghe and the LTTE.

On 1 October 2003, Elle Gunawanse launched the National Patriotic Movement, accusing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe of trying to divide the country.

What stops his arrest and trial? Nothing, other than the lack of will of the political establishment to do so. There he is in all his glory, right in the middle of Colombo, with his heavily blood-soaked yellow robes and none will dare touch him.

There are others with a case to answer. There is one, in particular, a Minister in Jayawardene's government, who has much to explain. Let us call him "Minister X"

There were 72 Tamil political detainees in the Welikada prison in Colombo, held there without charge or trial. On 25 July 1983. 35 of them were massacred by Sinhalese prisoners in the jail. President Jayawardene, in a rare act of responsibility, wanted the rest of the Tamil detainees to be immediately sent to Jaffna prison. However, Minister Lalith Athulathmudali and 'Minister X', opposed this saying that the Sinhalese would become further infuriated over such a decision. It was obvious that Athulathmudali and 'Minister X' did not want the prisoners taken away to safety. Surprise! Surprise! A day later (27 July) there was a second prison massacre, and another 18 slaughtered. Of the original 72 Tamil detainees, only 19 were left. The Sinhalese would now not be 'infuriated', since the job was $\frac{3}{4}$ done.

Who was Minister "X"? Find it out for yourself. There's a bit of home-work for you.

Action

In January 2008, I was invited to New Zealand to address a special prayer session in the Elim Church, Auckland. Rev Prince Devanathan, a soft-spoken Tamil priest conducting the service said, *"We have been praying and praying for Peace for more than 20 years. But the more we pray, the further we get distanced from Peace. That is the reality"*. He then came out with the finest words I have heard for years – **"Prayer without action is dead"**

I'd say the same about an apology. **An apology without action is dead.** It is this 'action' that I have been trying to deliver in the past two and a half decades.

The same holds for protests. To protest, to hold a vigil, to remember the July 1983 massacre is fine. But **protests without action is dead.**

I urge you to **act**. To free the Tamil people to live with dignity, and safety in their area of historical habitation – the North and East. I urge you to act; to act to save the Tamil people from the Genocide, started in July 1983, and now progressing at an alarming rate. Like the Welikada prison massacre, it is $\frac{3}{4}$ done. Act **now**. Tomorrow may be too late for the Tamils in the North and East of the 'Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka', as it likes to call itself.