

The murder of Thamilchelvan

Brian Senewiratne

MA,MD,FRCP,FRACP
Brisbane, Australia

On 2 November 2007, the Sri Lankan Air Force target-bombed a meeting in Kilinochchi, the effective capital of the *de facto* State of Tamil Eelam killing S.P.Thamilchelvan, the Political Head and Chief Negotiator of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and five, (now six), of his colleagues. I call it a *de facto* State based on the compelling article by Professor Kristian Stokke, University of Oslo, Norway, *Tamil Eelam – a De Facto State. Building the Tamil Eelam State: Emerging State Institutions and Forms of Governance in LTTE-controlled Areas in Sri Lanka*, published in *Third World Quarterly* this year.

Despite a spate of bombings and killings of Tamils in the Tamil North and East by the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) in the two years since Rajapakse became President (November 2005), the repercussions of this particular killing will be serious. Just as the massacre of the Tamil civilians in the Sinhala South in July 1983 marked the turning point in Sinhala-Tamil relationships, the Government-directed assassination of Thamilchelvan could well mark the turning point in the relationships between the Sinhalese Government and the Tamils.

I will not detail the major contribution that Thamilchelvan has made to get some justice for the Tamil people. I'd only say that he has taken part in every one of the numerous 'Peace talks' with a succession of Sri Lankan governments, and has been the key man between foreign governments and the LTTE. To 'take him out', is to seriously compromise any future political negotiations which the GOSL might be *forced* to have by the aid-givers.

The absolute dishonesty of the GOSL.

Assassinating the political Head of one of the two parties to any possible negotiations exposes the absolute dishonesty of a Government which claims, to the international community, that it is ready and willing to enter into negotiations. Obvious as this dishonesty is, it is the business of those of us who are concerned with the plight of the Tamil people to point this out to foreign Governments and, even more so, to the citizens of these countries so that they can ask the necessary questions from their political leaders who can ask the GOSL for an explanation.

A flagrant violation of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA).

The GOSL claims that the 2002 CFA still holds and that the military assault on the Tamil areas is 'defensive'. This is clearly arrant nonsense. The Ceasefire does not hold, and has not held, since Mahinda Rajapakse became President in November 2005. On 16 April 2007, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the President's brother, and Defence Secretary, said, "*Officially we have not said there is no Ceasefire Agreement, probably to keep the international community happy*". The double negative indicates that the CFA does hold but it is only to keep the international community happy i.e. to bluff them. That is typical political duplicity characteristic of the GOSL. It is our business to point this out, not to foreign Governments (which know all this), but to the citizens of these countries, for reasons already stated. I stress this since this important point is not appreciated by many expatriate Tamils.

Take them out one by one.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, making no effort to hide his intentions, bragged to Reuters *“This is just a message (to the LTTE) that we know where their leaders are if we want we can take them one by one”*.

This threat shows how little the ruling junta, and others of their ilk, know about liberation struggles. As the Tamil leadership is taken out, ‘one by one’, others will be lining up to replace them. The replacements will probably be more determined than the ones they have replaced.

If the intention is take out the Tamils ‘one by one’, then it is genocide. If Genocide is the intention of Gotabhaya Rajapakse who is an American citizen, it is the obligation of the American Government to charge him under the UN Convention on Genocide (see later). If the US Government does not do so, then it is up to the expatriate Tamil lawyers (and others) to do so.

Genocide

The *UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Act of Genocide* defines Genocide as an act committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group”.

The numbers killed are not relevant. What is important is the intention and the act(s) to achieve this intention. There is not the slightest doubt that the intention (and the acts) of the current GOSL is to ‘take out the Tamils’, “one by one”, in reality, at a much faster rate.

As I have pointed out in the DVDs I have recently released on the ethnic conflict, bombing, shelling and murdering people is not the only way to kill them. You can starve them, withhold essential medicines, prevent ‘survival activities’ such as fishing and agriculture, and destroy their businesses, markets, homes, hospitals and schools. Once the intention is there, ways to achieve genocide are endless.

All of these the GOSL is doing, and has done, to the Tamil people in the North and East for at least two decades. This has markedly increased since Rajapakse and his blood-thirsty and irresponsible mob came into power in November 2005.

If genocide is what is going on in Sri Lanka (and of that there cannot be the slightest doubt), the International Community will have to act. It is our business to point this out. If the international community does nothing, then we will have to act. If we do nothing, we will be as responsible as those in Sri Lanka who are responsible for this universally condemned action.

Winning hearts and minds

The GOSL has repeatedly claimed that a priority is to ‘win the hearts and minds of the Tamil people’.

At the (massive) funeral for Thamichelvan and his colleagues, with more than 25,000 people gathered to farewell a much-loved leader, Sri Lankan Kfir jets flew several sorties over this area. What were they doing there? Had they come to pay their respects to Thamichelvan? Unlikely. Had they come to check how many people (Tamils) were left in Tamil Eelam who had to be “taken out”? Possibly.

Was it to intimidate the people in the North? If it was, as was likely, it is hardly the way to “win the hearts and minds of the Tamil people”. On the contrary, it is one certain way to convince many

Tamils, if not all, that to be ruled by a bunch capable of behaviour such as this is simply unacceptable. We should be grateful to the GOSL for this type of unbelievable stupidity since it is making more and more Tamils realise that Tamil Eelam is the only solution.

The reaction in Colombo.

Thamilchelvan's assassination was predictably greeted by the ruling mob and the Sinhalese Armed Forces with unrestrained glee.

The Military

Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara struggled to justify the murder, claiming that the LTTE's political leader had been involved in recent military operations. If that is adequate justification for murder, then if the LTTE takes out the Sinhala political leaders who have been involved, indeed directed, the recent military assaults on the Tamil people, it will have to be accepted as 'justifiable', and not an act of terrorism.

Nanayakkara boasted that the death was a 'moral boost' to the armed forces and would be a great loss to the LTTE. What this mediocre military man fails to appreciate is that no one is irreplaceable. There are many who will be lining up to replace Thamilchelvan. Indeed the flood gates may well be opened and those who cannot contain their anger will turn themselves into human bombs. Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, does not need to recruit suicide bombers - the GOSL and its Armed Forces are doing it for him.

In the DVDS I have referred to, I have described 'the suicide bomber mentality'. *"You shot my father, raped and killed my mother, hanged my brother, tortured and killed my sister. I have nothing left when I find life too difficult and decide to leave this planet; I will take you with me. If you happen to be the Army Commander who sent Kfir bombers to bomb my home, I will surely take you with me."*

There is much condemnation of suicide bombers but no thought given to how people reach this point of absolute desperation that they are even prepared to sacrifice their lives. The responsibility for suicide bombers rests with the GOSL.

The President

On the day that Thamilchelvan was murdered, Rajapakse was handing over houses to the families of disabled Sinhalese soldiers in the Sinhala South. Going from blatant lies to award-winning lies, he said, *"I respect them profoundly and consider them the most disciplined Forces in the world. They have not killed or raped anybody"*. The latter claim confirms what his predecessor said in an interview in London. She said that during her regime only one Tamil girl had been raped. I asked that this uniquely unfortunate girl be named, so that we can reassure thousands of others that the Armed Forces only *pretended* to rape them.

Sometime ago I attended a course on 'Basic Politics', to see what the game was all about and how it differed from Medicine. The opening sentence of the very first lecture said it all. *"Governments lie"*. Allowing this to sink in, the lecturer went on *"Politicians are incapable of speaking the truth."*

I draw attention to a recently released book by that outstanding Sinhala journalist, Victor Ivan, describing Rajapakse's predecessor as the *"Mother of Liars"*. The book was published in Sinhala. The English translation is *"The Queen of Deceit"*. It is well worth Rs 500 (US \$ 5).

The new incumbent to the Presidency is certainly no better. He has recently claimed that his Government was dedicated to an “honourable peace”. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Rajapakse recently said that the LTTE could not “impose conditions”. These are catch phrases for ‘no negotiations’ with the LTTE, and by extension, the Tamil people. As I have pointed out in numerous publications and DVDs, it is not the LTTE who wanted a Separate Tamil State, it was the Tamil people in the North and East who in the 1977 General Election, voted overwhelmingly for the establishment of a separate Tamil State, Eelam. Eelam is not the creation of the Tamil people but the result of Sinhala ethno-religious chauvinism and extremism, the exclusion of Tamils from the decision making process, and the developmental neglect of the areas they live in (the North and East).

Politically-active Buddhist clergy

It is reported that there were special thanks being offered at some Buddhist temples at the news of Thamichelvan’s murder. What Buddhist stanza states that murder is a cause for celebration or for thanksgiving? What we see in Sri Lanka is a new type of violent Buddhism. It is time that Buddhists and ‘half-Buddhists’ such as myself (my mother was a devout Buddhist), lodged a strong protest at the desecration of the doctrine of one of the greatest teachers of peace and non-violence the world has ever known. As Thamichelvan’s leader once said, “If President Jayawardene was a true Buddhist, I would not be carrying a gun’. How right he was. The time for a revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is overdue.

The Colombo Press – “His Master’s Voice” Press.

As was expected, the right wing *Island* newspaper celebrated the murder “*Air Force avenges A’pura raid, bags Tigers’ public face at dawn*”. Hopefully this rabidly racist ‘newspaper’ will not complain if the Tigers ‘bag’ the public faces of the Sinhalese ethnic chauvinists and extremists in Colombo.

Lakbima News published a photograph of the LTTE leader Prabhakaran paying his respects to Thamichelvan under the provocative title, “*This time its him – next time.....?*”, clearly urging the murder of Prabhakaran.

Here again is the fallacy - that people are irreplaceable. “Taking out’ Prabhakaran will only result in the appearance of someone who is even more determined to achieve the goal of justice for the Tamil people.

Taking out leaders from a liberation struggle does not change the course of the struggle. Locking up Nelson Mandela for 25 years did not stop the march of South Africans to an apartheid-free country.

What has to be ‘taken out’ is not Thamichelvan, Prabhakaran or the LTTE, but the extremist policy to make multilingual, multireligious, multicultural Sri Lanka into a Sinhala Buddhist Nation. Unless/until that is ‘taken out’, the division of Sri Lanka will be inevitable.

The other Sinhala political parties.

As would be expected, the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was jubilant. Wimal Weerawansa, the JVP parliamentary leader, urged the Government to declare the assassination of Thamichelvan as a victory for the military and the people. If by “the people” he

means the 'Sinhalese people', I, as a Sinhalese, object strongly. Ordinary Sinhalese are no more responsible for the murder of Thamilchelvan than they are for the renewed war, which is opposed by the majority of the more decent Sinhalese people who have to pay the price which Rajapakse's children will not pay. That act of 'patriotism' is for the children of the poor who have to join the armed forces for economic survival, "economic recruits". Their parents continue to see their children returning in body-bags.

The Opposition United National Party (UNP).

The reaction of the UNP, the darlings of some Tamils, was no surprise, at least to me. UNP MPs hailed the killing of Thamilchelvan as a "great victory" for the (Sinhala) Air Force. The UNP national organiser, S.B Dissanayake said that "There should be no regrets about (Thamilchelvan's) death". This is no surprise, coming as it does from a man who in a previous birth, suggested to the then President Chandrika Kumaratunga that "one or two newspaper editors" critical of her government, should be "taken out". We are talking of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

A week before the Presidential Election in November 2005, I published "*The Political ideology of the Sinhalese: Anti-Tamil*", in which I said that who was elected as President was of little concern to the Tamils since the entire spectrum of the Sinhala polity was anti -Tamil, and that the Tamils need not help the Sinhalese to choose an anti-Tamil President. Perhaps I should have pointed out that the only exceptions to this were politicians from the genuine Left such as Siritunga Jayasuriya (United Socialist Party) and Dr Wickremabahu Karunaratne (New Left Front). It is significant that the former contested the Presidential Election and got only 0.4% of the votes. This indicates that despite all the problems heaped on them because of this unnecessary war, the Sinhalese people are not ready for much-needed radical changes in their leaders.. Jayasuriya is lucky to be alive. In January 2007, a protest meeting organised by him (and others) opposing the war, was broken up by 300 armed Sinhalese thugs led by a Minister in Rajapakse's Government.

The foreign reaction

None of the countries involved in the so-called peace process – US, EU, Norway or Japan have uttered a word critical of this act of blatant government terrorism, A week before Thamilchelvan's assassination, Robert Blake, the US Ambassador to Colombo, condemned the LTTE's attack on the Anuradhapura Air Force base expressing sympathy for the families of the military personnel killed. No such statement has so far being issued over the unprovoked killing of Thamilchelvan who was personally known to many of the diplomats involved in the peace negotiations. This deafening silence can only be interpreted as approval for this blatant violation of the cease-fire (the unprovoked bombing of a major town in the Tamil area), and the murder of a political leader.

A typical example, one of many, of the double-speak of foreign Governments was seen in Trincomalee on 8 November 2007, a week after the murder of Thamilchelvan. US Ambassador Blake handed over radar-based surveillance systems and several inflatable boats to the Sri Lankan Navy, saying that he hoped it would help the Navy to intercept the arms shipment to the 'rebels' (ie. the LTTE), With hypocrisy which has characterised foreign Governments, he went on to urge the GOSL to pursue a negotiated settlement to the Sri Lankan conflict and stressed the importance of fully respecting human rights! As I have said, and repeated, in my DVDs, it is this manipulation of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict by foreign Governments for their own geopolitical and economic gains which has kept the conflict going. Foreign Governments, in particular the US, China and India do not want to see an end to this conflict. If it ends, it will weaken their ability to manipulate the Sinhala regime in Colombo to give them the necessary facilities to control the Indian Ocean. The international games being played, particularly by US, India and China have

more to do with their geo-politics than conflict resolution in Sri Lanka. For the sake of completeness, one should substitute 'US-EU-Japan' for 'US'. This important perspective will be added to the updated DVDs which I will release in the next few weeks.

Will it weaken the LTTE?

Will the murder of Thamilchelvan be a "great loss to the LTTE" (as the military spokesman thinks it will be) and by extension, weaken the LTTE? Ironically, it might actually do the opposite in that Tamils who have not supported a separate state might well do so now. Those who have thought that political negotiations is the way to go, might well realise that in dealing with a Government which is 'taking out' the negotiators, this is simply not a possibility.

Retaliation

There is certainly a possibility of retaliation by the LTTE or others enraged by this unprovoked act of aggression. If it is alright for the Sinhala Government to bomb the effective capital of Tamil Eelam, it might be argued that by the same token, it is alright for the Tamils to bomb the capital of the Sinhala State, Colombo.

Should the LTTE decide to retaliate in Colombo, with its dense population and buildings, the damage could be massive. To put it bluntly, it is 'to be expected'- as was the recent retaliatory bombing (by the LTTE) of the oil storage facility just a few kilometres north of Colombo. Despite all the boasts, the Sri Lankan defences are so incompetent that two Tiger planes, no more than toy planes, flew to the South, dropped their bombs and flew back (safely). To their credit, they did not target or damage civilians or civilian property. They certainly had the capacity to fly further South and drop the pay load on Colombo itself. Had they done so, the damage would have been serious. Should this occur, now or in the future, the Sinhala people will have to hold their Government responsible for this retaliatory attack.

The ability to shoot down the Tiger aircraft is not a solution. If bombs cannot be dropped from the air, they could be delivered on two legs, volunteers for which will not be too hard to find. As I have said in the DVDS, "desperate people do desperate things".

Guerrilla warfare

There is yet another possibility which the GOSL must appreciate. Should the LTTE decide to abandon open confrontation and revert back to guerrilla warfare, the GOSL and its Armed Forces will be in serious strife. A conventional army cannot fight a guerrilla force on guerrilla soil. The 4th largest army in the world, India, learnt this in 1988. It is unlikely that the Sri Lankan Army will be able to do what the mighty Indian Army had failed.

Time is always on the side of the guerrillas. One cannot guard every road, every bridge, every building, and every installation, for ever. Guerrillas can choose the time and the place to strike. The Sinhala Government has yet to learn this very basic lesson in guerrilla warfare.

The Agenda

The agenda of the Rajapakse Government in killing Thamilchelvan is far more complex than 'taking out' the Tamil leadership. It is part of 'crisis management' in the Sinhala South.

There has been a massive increase in 'defence' spending which increased 45% this year (2007) and there are plans for another 20% increase next year. Government subsidies and services have

been slashed, as well as pay and work conditions for workers in the public sector. Intolerable burdens have been placed on hundreds of thousands of ordinary people in the Sinhala South. In October 2007 inflation was 19.3%. The people are being called upon to 'tighten their belts' for the war effort to 'save the nation'. This is now being openly questioned and people are taking to the streets.

In late October (2007), 200,000 public sector teachers decided to strike. A week later, police broke up a demonstration by thousands of unemployed graduates.

To stifle ongoing unrest, government ministers repeatedly ban protests and strikes as unpatriotic and have imposed a series of emergency laws which have undermined democracy. On 29 October 2007, Rajapakse proclaimed new emergency regulations to censor any views of military deployment or activities, including purchases of military equipment. The latter was not only to suppress criticism of the war but also scandals over the purchase of MiG -27 jet fighters from the Ukraine. Amidst widespread protests, the regulations were revoked.

Whatever the claimed 'victories' on the battlefield in the Tamil North and East, it is clear that the Sinhala Government is losing credibility and control in the Sinhalese South.

With a supposed 'victory' in the East, the Government claimed that the LTTE were seriously weakened (militarily) and were on the run. This claim was blown to pieces on 22 October 2007 when the LTTE Black Tigers infiltrated the heavily fortified Air Force Base in Anuradhapura and damaged or destroyed 26 military aircraft (a number officially admitted to by the Anuradhapura Police), costing some US\$ 40 million. More damaging than the military and economic loss was the damage done to the credibility of the Government and its Armed Forces in the eyes of the Sinhalese.

Something 'had to be done' to restore confidence, and if that meant murdering the LTTE Chief Political negotiator and markedly setting back the possibility of a negotiated settlement, the Government could not care less. As I have said in my DVDS (*The new killing fields of Asia*), the arrogance of Rajapakse is that he does not care what the world thinks.

With mounting civil unrest in the Sinhalese South because of economic problems and people taking to the streets, the murder of Thamilchelvan was used by the Government to immediately intensify the roadblocks, security checks, raids, etc in Colombo claiming that the LTTE would retaliate. The Police announced that additional troops were being mobilised to tighten security in the capital.

In reality, Colombo had to be secured, not from the Tamil Tigers, but from its own (Sinhala) people, enraged by the intolerable financial burdens imposed on them.

As the Sinhalese unleash their anger on their Government, more of the same might follow. I would not be surprised if this takes the form of a total destruction of the Tamil North. That it would make the ethnic conflict unsolvable is not an immediate problem for the ruling junta.

What has been achieved?

What has the Sri Lankan Government achieved by the murder of Thamilchelvan? Nothing, other than a massive shift in Tamil thinking towards a separate Tamil State, and a sabotage of any possible negotiated settlement to a conflict which is destroying the country. So much for responsible leadership. One hears a lot about the ethnic crisis, the humanitarian crisis, the economic crisis etc. However the biggest crisis in Sri Lanka is a crisis in political leadership. The

country is not only economically bankrupt but, what is more serious, politically bankrupt. The murder of Thamichelvan is evidence of this.

Our responsibility

In several recent meetings I have been asked, "What is the LTTE doing?" My answer has been, "Never mind the LTTE, what are *you* doing?" The question I was asked typifies the attitude of the expatriate Tamil community – buck-passing.

The LTTE are doing whatever can be done to cope with one of the most brutal and barbaric regimes ever to rule Sri Lanka. That this murderous regime is able to continue to destroy that which they have not built, the administration of the Vanni and the genocide of the Tamil people, is a reflection of *our* failure.

One of the most powerful forces the Tamils have is a million expatriate Tamils living and working in the most influential and affluent nations in the world. If this massive force did what it could to expose the duplicity of foreign governments and the criminal acts of the GOSL, already in the human rights dog-house, the necessary pressure would have been generated a long time ago. It is clear that the target will have to be citizens of these countries, not political leaders who know all this. It is for this reason that I put together the DVDs on the atrocities being committed on the Tamil people in the North and East. The expatriate Tamil community is a long way from realising all this and hence, its abysmal failure. If the assassination of Thamichelvan wakes up the 'sleeping Tamils' abroad, he would not have died in vain.

Brian Senewiratne

Brisbane, Australia

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