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Ravindra Ranasinha / February 2011

The Forward March of Mahinda

Sri Lankan journalist, sociologist and educationist **Ravindra Ranasinha** writes about what is really going on in Sri Lanka after the LTTE rebels were wiped out from the island with the power of the gun and how the Sri Lankan President **Mahinda Rajapakse** is battling numerous legal charges leveled against his regime by the Tamil Diaspora.



There is a vague understanding about what is really going on in the island of Sri Lanka.

The regime is engaged in battling charges leveled against them by the Tamil Diaspora. The matter looks crucial. It may be recalled that none of the Rajapakses could visit the West without being obstructed by diverse campaigns on the war crimes they've committed in the last phase of the conflict. There is nothing Mahinda could do about this, having bluntly refused Ban Ki Moon's panel from coming down to Sri Lanka to investigate the war crimes. The regime openly accepts that war were crimes committed and so the consequences have to be faced by the Rajapakse brothers. The US Ambassador, Patricia Butenis is reported to have said in one of her cables (as revealed by Wikileaks) that the Rajapakse brothers were liable for the war crimes. While this has not been denied by Mahinda's government, they have made several statements that the patriotic war of Mahinda is being undervalued by the West. Butenis says in her cable: "responsibility for many of the alleged crimes rests with the country's senior civilian and military leadership, including President Rajapaksa and his brothers...."

The story of Ms Damilvany Gnanakumar, a British medic, who was captured by the army and kept in Menik farm gives an account on how the Tamils were treated in the so-called 'welfare villages' of Rajapakse's.



A third person narration of the story of Damilvany:

The young mother was standing by the side of the road, clutching her baby. The baby was dead. Damilvany Gnanakumar watched as she tried to make a decision. Around them, thousands of people were picking their way between bodies strewn across the road, desperate to escape the fighting all around them.

"The mother couldn't bring the dead body and she didn't want to leave it as well. She was standing... holding the baby. She didn't know what to do ... In the end, because of the shell bombing and people rushing — there were thousands and thousands of people, they were rushing in and pushing everyone — she just had to leave the baby at the side of the road, she had to leave the body there and come, she had no choice. And I was thinking in myself 'What have these people done wrong? Why are they going through this? Why is the international government not speaking up for them? I'm still asking."

Four months have passed since that incident and Gnanakumar is sitting on a cream leather sofa in the living room of her family home in Chingford, Essex, reliving the final days of Sri Lanka's brutal civil war.

For most of those four months, the 25-year-old British graduate was imprisoned behind razor wire inside the country's grim internment camps, home to nearly 300,000 people. She was released last week, partly as a result of pressure from this newspaper, and flew back into London on Sunday.

The last time she publicly spoke about the conflict was from the hospital where she was working, inside the ever-shrinking war zone in Sri Lanka's north-east. The national army had surrounded the small sliver of land where the remnants of the Tamil Tiger guerrillas held out and where hundreds of thousands of civilians had taken refuge. She had been in despair: a shell had just struck the hospital and dozens were dead. "At the moment, it is like hell," she said then.

Gnanakumar was one of a small group of medics treating the wounded and providing a running commentary to the outside world from behind the lines. For months she had managed to stay alive while around her thousands died. At night, she lived in bunkers dug in the sand. During the day, she helped in the makeshift hospitals, dodging the shells and the bullets, tending the wounded and the dying, as the doctors tried to operate with butchers' knives and watered-down anaesthetic.

Now her damning account provides a powerful rebuke to the claims of the Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, that the defeat of the Tamil Tigers was achieved without the spilling of a drop of civilian blood.

Born in Jaffna in the Tamil-dominated north of Sri Lanka in 1984, Gnanakumar and her family moved to Britain in 1994. Until 28 February last year, she had not been back. She had just completed a biomedical degree at Greenwich University, but her short-lived marriage was on the rocks and she decided it was time to make a clean break. She left the house, telling no one where she was going.

Arriving in the capital, Colombo, she headed for Vanni, the Tamil heartland, to stay with a relative she calls her brother (her real brother is back in the UK, along with her two sisters). There seemed little sign of danger, but by June 2008 fighting was getting worse: the Tamil Tigers, or Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), still thought they would be able to negotiate a ceasefire, as they had done in the past, but the government had other ideas. They were determined to destroy the LTTE once and for all. Gnanakumar decided to stay on to try to help those who were trapped by the advance.

Even before the arrival of the government's ground forces, there had been regular air raids by air force Kfir jets. But in early January artillery barrages began, forcing the population to move.

That was when the reality of the war hit Gnanakumar for the first time.

"It was raining and... you could see everywhere on the road the blood is running with the water and the bodies were left there because there was no-one to identify who was dead and who was alive, the bodies were just laid down on the floor and that's the first time I saw dead bodies and wounded people crying out, shouting."

Wherever they stopped, they built a bunker, digging down until they could stand up in the hole, cutting down palm branches and laying them across the top for a roof and packing sandbags on the top and around the sides.

As the frontline advanced, trapping as many as 300,000 people inside a shrinking enclave of LTTE-held land, Gnanakumar went to the makeshift government hospital, which had moved into a former primary school, and volunteered to help, dressing wounds and administering first aid.

Her laboratory training had not prepared her for anything like this, but she learned as she went along. As the fighting intensified, they were treating as many as 500 people every day in two rooms. "They had a shortage of medicine but they had to somehow save the people. The last two weeks or so there was a shortage of everything."

With replacement blood running out, she had to filter what she could from the patients through a cloth before feeding it back into their veins. When the anesthetics ran short, they diluted them with distilled water. "I watched when there was a six-year-old boy," she said. "They had to take off the leg and also the arm, but they didn't have proper equipment, they just had a knife that the butchers use to cut the meat, and we have to use that to take off his leg and arm. He cried and cried."

As the army closed in, it got worse.

"People were running and running to get themselves away from the shell bombing, but they couldn't and it came to a point where we thought we are all going to die, there was no way we could be safe anymore here, but we just had to take it. I mean, you can't get out of the shell-bombing. I didn't think that I would be alive or that I would be here now... I thought OK, I'm going to die, that is the end of it.

"One day I was inside the [operating] theatre and the next room was bombed. We had a lot of the treated people left in the room for the doctors to go and monitor and they all died in that shell bomb. And they [the Sri Lankan forces] again bombed the hospital and one of the doctors died in that."

Inside the hospital, there was no respite. Gnanakumar cannot forget the day a mother was brought in, injured, clutching her baby.

"She had the baby on her lap, the baby was dead and the mother didn't know it. The doctor said: 'Don't tell her, because if we tell her now she will start crying out and shouting and ... we have to save the mother first.' So we said: 'OK, give the baby to us, we'll look after her you go and get the treatment from the doctor,' and only after she got the treatment we told that her baby was dead. I can easily say it now, but at that moment I was in so much pain, the innocent baby, the mother didn't know the baby was dead, she thought 'my baby is sleeping'.

"There were so many incidents. Another time the mother was dead and the baby was still suckling."

The fighting was getting closer. They ate what they could find and slept—those who could—in the occasional lulls.

"You have to be ready to run, you can't relax and go to sleep, any minute you just have to be up and ready," she said.

Gnanakumar could not take any more. On 13 May the hospital had been hit, killing about 50 people. "The bunker right next to ours it was shelled from above. Six people from the same family died and three were wounded.

"I saw them... suddenly I heard people crying and I thought, it has to be somewhere really close... I came out of my tent and I saw blood everywhere and the people — I couldn't even imagine that place, there was blood and then the bodies were into pieces everywhere and my brother said: 'Just pack up and let's get away from this place.'"

In the last five days, she says, she believes about 20,000 people died. It is a very high estimate, though the UN has acknowledged the true death toll may never be known. Tamil groups such as the Global Tamil Forum say her account corroborates their own figures drawn from interviews with survivors.

Over the course of the three-decade war, it is estimated that up to 100,000 people died. But independent confirmation of the death toll in the final days has been impossible. The Sri Lankan government has barred independent journalists from the war zone to this day, and has expelled UN officials and aid workers.

Meanwhile, the survivors of the final assault have been spirited away inside sprawling camps in a militarised zone.

It was to those camps, at Menik Farm, that Gnanakumar was taken. Following that last bombing, she joined thousands fleeing towards the government lines. "We start moving and after walking about one hour or so we saw the Sri Lankan army. They were saying: 'Come, you are safe now, food will be provided for you.' There were bodies strewn everywhere, torn into pieces. We had to just walk." That was when she saw the mother agonising over what to do with her dead baby. No one had time to bury the bodies, she says. Some pushed them into bunkers and covered them with a little sand. That was the best they could do.

That night, they slept in a school, later they were taken by bus to the town of Vavuniya. She called her mother: "I said, 'Mum, just get me out of here, I just want to get out of this place.' and the phone got cut off."

The Sri Lankan government has built a series of camps to house the estimated 300,000 people who poured out of the war zone. It claims that it needs to hold the civilians until it can weed out the former Tamil Tiger fighters; its critics, including many UN organisations and independent aid groups, question why (even if that were true) does it need to imprison children and elderly behind barbed wire, and why it has taken so long a time to identify the rebels. Despite pledges to start sending the internees back to their homes "at the earliest possible opportunity", the UN says only 2,000 have so far been released.

There was no food that first day Gnanakumar arrived, and she had lost contact with the people she had been with. She slept in a tent with strangers.

Even after the deprivations of the war zone, conditions in the camp still came as a shock.

"Wherever you go there are big queues, whatever you want-you have to queue. The toilets are terrible, I can't describe how disgusting. Flies everywhere, mosquitoes, unhygienic ... People had all sorts of illnesses."

"People have lost their family members, they are separated from their families ... and they are going through depression."

Accounts circulated of rapes and murders, of people disappearing. Some people committed suicide: a teacher was found hanging from a tree.

Military intelligence officers were roaming the camps, looking for former Tamil Tigers, she said. "It is an open prison, you are free to walk but you are inside a prison, you are not allowed to step out. You can't. There were guards everywhere and checkpoints."

A couple of days after she arrived, the British high commission made contact through the UNHCR. An appeal from her parents in the Guardian brought fresh hope and a flurry of activity: she was moved from the overcrowded zone two to zone one, the part of the camp the authorities show to visitors.

"I was there when the UN secretary Ban Ki-moon came in ... He stayed there for about 10 minutes and just went. Why didn't he go into the camp and talk to the people and spend some time asking them what their problems were? I thought he has a responsibility and people were expecting something from him. They expected much from him and he just spent 10 minutes and that's it."

The officials told Gnanakumar she would be staying for a couple of days and would then be released. "And then the 48 hours turned into three days and then it turned into weeks and months and I thought OK, now I understand it is not going to happen." She was interrogated five times — what was she doing there? Why had she been in the hospitals?

The call to say she was going home came last week. She was taken to Colombo to meet the president's brother, Basil Rajapaksa.

"He said OK, you went through so much in the country and now you are released you can go and join your family and be happy. He wasn't sorry about it." She was then handed over to British officials.

She speaks in a matter-of-fact way, rarely betraying emotion. Her hair has been tied back tightly — she had beautiful hair before she left, she says, but lost most of it in the camps. She is not sure what she will do now, maybe something in the field of medicine.

"I'm happy and proud of myself that I was able to help the people. I still think it is unreal that I am in the UK ... I never thought I would be alive and coming back, even in the camp.

"After looking at the people dying and dead bodies everywhere, it is as if nothing threatens me any more, like I have had the hardest time in my life and I think I am prepared to take up whatever happens in life now.

"I'm not that old Vany who sat down and cried for little things... I'm stronger now after going through and seeing all those problems. My mind is clear now."
(<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/308162.html>)

Presently, the carrots fed by the UPFA government are taken in unquestioningly by the Sinhala people. 'Patriotism' has become the watchword that plays a huge role in covering up all the dirty acts the authorities and their henchmen commit or committed. The ethnic gaps have widened to such an extent that no Tamil voice could be heard speaking up for rights and freedom. This suppression has struck their lives like a thunderbolt, killing their spirit. The first act of suppression took place with the legislature approving the 18th Amendment to the Constitution removing the term limits for a person to become the President of the country. Mahinda Rajapakse thus made himself an absolute authority in the country, weakening the power of the legislature and judiciary. The following is a picture on this issue drawn by a columnist in the island:

On the eve of the passage of the 18th Amendment, the Mirihana police arrested the wife and two brothers of a printing press owner. The printer, who had been tasked by the UNP with printing a poster depicting President Mahinda Rajapakse in a Hitlerian guise, was not available when the police went in search of him. Deprived of their prey, the 'guardians of the law' took away his spouse and siblings. Arresting or punishing the family members of a supposed wrongdoer, in his absence and in lieu for him, though outlawed and outmoded in a democracy, was the norm in monarchies... an omen of times to come.

Impunity is endemic to absolute monarchs, who see themselves as above the law and indeed as the law. It is symbolic of the anti-democratic, tyrannical ethos of the Rajapakse era.

Speaking on a state-owned TV channel on the 7th of September, a key government minister opined, fervently and repeatedly, that President Rajapakse is not just a man but a historical phenomenon, the greatest in the long history of this island....They persist in producing these drivel by the bushel because they think the President likes and perhaps even expects such panegyrics. That says something about the mentality of the man, and of his followers. Enhancing the powers of such a man, exponentially, and, enabling him to contest the presidency ad infinitum is neither a wise nor a sane deed. Power and megalomaniacs are a combustive mixture.

18th Amendment may have been less damaging and more defensible if it contained either the term-limit removal or the enhancing of the powers of the presidency, but not both. Unfortunately the 18th Amendment contains both provisions. It empowers the President to hire and fire top officials and members of the 'Independent Commissions' (thus rendering them totally dependent on the Executive). Not only will the President be able to make or break the Elections Commissioner's career; the powers hitherto enjoyed by the Elections Commissioner have been curtailed drastically, enabling the Ruling Party to abuse state resources to its advantage during election times. Thanks to this confluence, free and fair elections will become impossible in Sri Lanka. Elections in which the rulers always win, officially, are a staple in a number of countries, from Zimbabwe to Myanmar; with the 18th Amendment we too will be part of that illustrious club (<http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2010/09/12/our-rajapakse-future>).

No matter how the Rajapakses try to conceal their anti-popular economic and political policies behind a beguiling façade of political populism, the Tamil Diaspora will not keep silent till they are brought to justice. The patriotism-mongering of Rajapakse's might win back the Sinhala voters but not the marginalized and underprivileged people in the country. One must not forget Rajapakse's London fiasco which brought so much discredit to this island. The Oxford Union had to cancel Rajapakse's programme and stop him coming to the premises as the Tamil Diaspora was completely agitated and even attempts were made to take Rajapakse to custody through a special order from a court of law.



This is what the BBC says about the agitation of the Tamils in London:

The agitation of the Tamils was a result of a video footage shown through Channel 4 News in the UK showing Tamil prisoners being killed. Channel 4 says that the footage was shot shortly before the defeat of Tamil Tiger rebels in May 2009. Further the Channel says that the video is an extended version of a similar video aired 16 months ago by the TV station and features bound prisoners – some female – being shot dead amid taunts from onlookers.

It says that their "lewd and callous comments seem strongly to suggest that sexual assaults took place before their deaths". "Since Channel 4 News received and broadcast the executions video over a year ago we have received hundreds of photographs and many more shocking videos depicting summary executions and rape," Channel 4 News Foreign Affairs Correspondent Jonathan Miller said. "We've now sent this five minute 30 second video to the UN panel convened to determine whether or not there should be an independent international war crimes inquiry."

The Sri Lankan government said that the video is not authentic and has been "compiled by enemies of the country who want to besmirch its international reputation". Apart from the war crimes, many other social and environmental issues have cropped up due to 'development plans' of Mahinda Rajapakse. The regime is now on the move to evict more than 70,000 residents from Colombo 02 in order to clear land for commercial development. The residents have formed the Action Committee to Defend the Right to Housing (ACDRH) to fight the eviction scheme of Rajapakse's. It was seen in some parts of Colombo the officials pasted red labels with UDA seals on the front walls of houses that must be vacated. Mahinda Rajapakse's government is planning the mass evictions as part of its attempts to transform Colombo city into a South Asian business hub. In order to suppress opposition, Rajapakse placed the UDA and the Land Reclamation and Development Board (LRD) – two civilian bodies-under the authority of the defense ministry, which also commands the military.

Despite its promises, the government has no concrete plans to provide houses for evicted families. Rajapakse did not allocate a cent to build new housing for shanty families in the 2011 budget, announced on November 22. While he claimed that the government's "next priority is to develop 70,000 housing facilities for shanty dwellers," Rajapakse said an "Urban Development Fund" would be established to meet relocation costs.

Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, elaborated on the government's plans: "The government is faced with the challenge of relocating 75,000 families who are mainly occupying the most valuable land and strategically vital canals in Colombo," he declared. "We need to develop the city to attract global investors and to make it a beautiful capital." Evicted people would be given "space in condominiums which will be built shortly," the defense secretary claimed. However, he did not say how and where these plans would be implemented. The government has no plans to build houses for low-income people in Colombo city. One resident said, "We have lived here for more than 50 years. When I got married, my husband did not have a house or job. We built this house and started a small shop to earn an income. We cannot leave Colombo. Our children go to nearby schools."

One official told that the government planned to build flats to sell for 2.5 million rupees (\$US22,500). The government would contribute 1.5 million rupees, leaving residents to raise 1 million rupees (\$US9,000) to buy a flat. "How could we pay such an amount?" ask these low income people.

It is not only for the human life that the regime has brought disaster but even to the precious nature that beautifies Lanka. Rajapakse's developmental plans with the construction of highways all over the country to attract foreign investors have made the most valuable Wilpattu wildlife sanctuary to be destroyed and even damage the eco-system in the country. The Sri Lanka Nature Forum says: '...Wilpattu is not only a dwelling place for wildlife and a source of water but a treasure trove of archaeology. A large amount of archaeological material and evidence is certain to have been destroyed in the course of the excavation and irregular road construction within the Park. It is difficult to understand what is expected of this "development" which deprives the nation of these riches. Entering into a National Park, constructing roads within it, destruction of wildlife habitats, constructing permanent bridges, felling and removal of trees, making excavations, and separating and fencing forest land have all been done in clear violation of Sections 3, 5 and 6 of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance No. 2 of 1937 as last revised by Act No. 22 of 2009. But the Department of Wildlife Conservation has not taken any action against any of this. It is a mystery why the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources have been silent while a protected area has been thus systematically destroyed. We ask the relevant authorities to take steps to stop all damage being caused to the Wilpattu National Park, the nations largest. Else what is eventually left will be a few small forest patches fragmented and devoid of wildlife. We hope that the authorities will act speedily to prevent this from happening'.

'A few weeks back...' says a writer, 'the Rajapaksa regime sold 10 acres of land located opposite the Galle Face Green, to Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts, for US\$125 million. Little wonder the brothers are rearing to evict 65,000-75,000 low-income families from Colombo... the lands occupied by these families are 'gold mines' which can be 'developed' and sold to foreigners, satiating, albeit temporarily, the voracious appetite of a cash-famished regime.

Far from being limited to Colombo, this 'Sell Baby, Sell' policy will be implemented island-wide, often to the detriment of local communities, including the Sinhalese. According to media reports, Shangri-La Hotels are interested in 100 acres of land in Hambantota while bidding is on-going for several islets off the North-Western coast. Soon it may be the turn of arable farming lands.

Development is the new Rajapaksa mantra. But their 'development vision' is as one-dimensional as their perspective on the North-Eastern issue. In the Rajapaksa worldview there is no ethnic problem, just Tiger terrorism; winning the war has solved all issues and Tamils no longer have grievances or fears requiring a political resolution (meanwhile in Jaffna, the disempowered inhabitants are being terrorized by a flash-flood of killings and abductions). The same flat-earthism characterises the Rajapaksa development-vision. It begins and ends with economic growth and regards growth rates and per-capita incomes as sufficient indicators of economic wellbeing of the people.

Social justice is thus rendered a non-issue, like ethnic-justice. Special measures to ameliorate the adverse effects of lop-sided economic growth are perceived as unnecessary, even damaging, as devolution. Perorations about agricultural self-sufficiency and knowledge-hubs notwithstanding, the Rajapaksas' really existing plan is to turn Sri Lanka into an R and R land (rest and recreation) for wealthy foreigners (thus, for instance, the Casino Bill, the low priority accorded to social infrastructure and the obsession with physical infrastructure). (<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/01/09/unleashing-demons-of-extremism/>).

Rajapakse's demand to the public is to make sacrifices for development but where will these sacrifices end up? Nobody knows the answer except the ruler himself. So the 'forward march' of Mahinda is elusive, especially, when the political elite enjoy the good life at public expense and in plain sight'.

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Ravindra Ranasinha is a veteran theatre activist and a journalist based in Sri Lanka. He can be reached at: ravindra.ranasinha@designandpeople.org

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