
Sri Lanka's war: the crucible of the sword

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by DAYAN JAYATILLEKA "I stand before you as someone who is not opposed to war in all circumstances. The Civil War was one of the bloodiest in history, and yet it was only through the crucible of the sword, the sacrifice of multitudes, that we could begin to perfect this union…" -- Senator Barack Obama, Oct 2, 2002, Chicago In regard to the Tamil Nadu assembly’s call for a ceasefire and an end to military operations, President Rajapakse has spoken for the overwhelming bulk of his citizens when he just said no.

Sri Lanka is not a powerful country, nor is it an influential small country such as Cuba, but it has its strengths. One of these is the resilience of its multiparty democracy under conditions of extreme duress, its eschewal of military rule and totalitarianism of the Right or Left. Another is the maintenance of comparatively decent labour standards and social indicators. Yet another is the synergy of civil society and state that made our recovery from the tsunami more impressive than those in Indonesia (Aceh) or post-Katrina Louisiana (according to Joel Schumacher of Refugee International). A fourth has been the strength of our top national leaders. Whatever their faults, one cannot say that the elected Presidents of Sri Lanka-- JR Jayewardene, Ranasingha Premadasa, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and Mahinda Rajapakse were/are weak leaders. Most of our leaders since Independence have been strong personalities—and the exceptions can be counted on the fingers of one hand. President Rajapakse has just returned from Delhi without having blinked on the essentials, and having reiterated the basics of our case. He has rightly refused to enter a ceasefire given the LTTE’s track record – unless it is preceded by the laying down of weapons. No self–respecting state will permit another’s domestic, or worse still, electoral compulsions, be the guideline of strategic and national security policy in relation to a terrorist secessionist army occupying a part of one’s national territory and menacing the rest. Cuba would not change its domestic policy towards violent counterrevolutionary saboteurs in accordance with resolutions passed in the Florida legislature! A sub-regional political leader has opined that Britain, India, Pakistan and the US did not use air power against its own citizens when dealing with terrorism. Al Qaeda does not consist of US citizens. Air power is used when the terrorist threat is not limited to a few or many underground cells exploding bombs or conducting ambushes, but when the terrorists are a veritable army or militia, numbering thousands, with its own heavy artillery, gunboats and fledgling air arm. In such cases, air power is vital. The US uses it in Afghanistan and across the border, and Pakistan uses helicopter gun-ships in its counter-terror operations if needs be. Israel of course deploys airpower even in heavily built-up areas, against Palestinian insurgents who do not operate as large units with base areas. A BBC Time watch episode revealed how the undeclared use of airpower in the Salvadoran civil war drove the guerrillas to the negotiating table. Evidently a pair of US Air Force AC 130 Spectre gun ships (huge transport planes laden with cannon and electronically driven Gatling guns) guided by an AWACS plane, all flying in from the US base in the Panama Canal zone and operating above cloud cover, brought down withering firepower on the guerrilla units of the FMLN, the most powerful insurgent movement in the history of Latin America (far superior to the LTTE), forcing them to abandon large unit warfare and thoughts of a military victory using, and downshift to small units as well as the goal of a negotiated solution. Thus, there is absolutely no justification in seeking the discontinuance of Sri Lanka’s use of airpower and every justification for its continued discriminate use. President Rajapakse draws his strength from the people. His very rooted-ness among the people enable him to tap the strength and determination that is welling up within the collective on the issue of defeating Tiger terrorism and separatism without being fooled yet again. The people have made Mahinda Rajapakse their reflection and instrument. The story of the ceasefire may not end there. Those who have been bribed by the Tigers or are in sympathy with their aims or are in fear of them or hope to use them as a surfboard to success or simply do not have the spine to bring to justice (or "take them out" as Barack Obama says of Bin Laden) those who murdered their former Prime Minister on their own soil and expect us to let off the hook those same murderers who accounted for many of our best leaders, may try again as the LTTE fights for its life. Other means – covert and/or coercive-- may be used to force a ceasefire. It is not that we Sri Lankans have no memory of some of these. Whichever way the story evolves, it will not be as in the 1980s. President Jayewardene’s government was widely perceived as suffering a deficit of legitimacy. Having been elected Prime Minister, he made himself president, won re-election having disenfranchised his main democratic opponent, dismissed 80,000 striking workers, de-legitimized his administration internally by substituting a referendum (coercive and fraudulent) for the decades-long practice of parliamentary elections and de-legitimised Sri Lankan externally by failing to crackdown on the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983. He had further weakened himself by unfairly proscribing the JVP and thereby triggering a Southern insurgency paralleling the Northern one. In short, President Jayewardene in 1987 was unstable and unpopular. President Rajapakse is not. What is more pertinent is that as public opinion polls show, the Sri Lankan spirit is far more unified and determined now than it has been for decades, and the collective is at a different point of its cycle than it was in 1987— it is an ascendant, resolute popular nationalism wielding state power rather than one divided, in crisis and descent. On his Delhi visit, President Rajapakse didn’t content himself with explaining his objection to a ceasefire unless preceded by demilitarisation of the Tigers, as many Southern hawks would have preferred him to. He reiterated his commitment to a political solution, specifying the content of that solution: the 13th amendment that ensued from Indo-Lanka interaction in 1987. As a base line, that’s as good as it gets, being the product of a highly asymmetrical interaction. However, as the president has indicated, enhancements of the 13th amendment through a multiparty consensus at the APC/APRC are awaited by him. He recommitted himself to the holding of elections to the Northern Provincial council shortly upon liberation, just as he did in the Eastern province. The President also gave an assurance concerning the Tamil civilians for whom he took responsibility. Given that there are far fewer recorded civilian casualties even as collateral damage, in Sri Lanka’s war, in comparison with other wars being waged in South Asia by those with far superior technological capacities, and given also that we have not imposed a Gaza-like blockade

on essential supplies to the Tiger controlled Tamil majority areas, this should be good enough. President Rajapakse also reiterated that the Tamils are "our people", an organic part of the Sri Lankan people, in contradistinction to those who hold that they are "inorganic" "guests", "visitors" at best "treated like our people". We can be proud of our leadership for its political determination to rid the country of the curse of separatism and terrorism in the face of mounting pressures. We can be proud of our armed forces for their performance in the field against one of the world's most ruthless and powerful insurgent movements. We can be proud of our people for their clarity of vision in understanding the nature of the Tigers and in staying staunch, making sacrifices of blood and material well being, to bring this war to a successful close. A ceasefire would be suicidal. This is a necessary war which must be fought to a victorious finish. As Senator Barack Obama so clearly explained while declaring, on Oct 2nd 2002, in Chicago his opposition to the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration: "I stand before you as someone who is not opposed to war in all circumstances. The Civil War was one of the bloodiest in history, and yet it was only through the crucible of the sword, the sacrifice of multitudes, that we could begin to perfect this union and drive the scourge of slavery from our soil... After September 11, after witnessing the carnage and destruction, the dust and tears, I supported this administration's pledge to hunt down and root out those who would slaughter innocents in the name of intolerance, and I would willingly take up arms myself to prevent such tragedy from happening again. I don't oppose all wars". The Lions are circling outside the marauding Tiger's lair. We must do our best to secure the space and time for them to close in for the final kill. Anyone who comes in the way to save the trapped and wounded predator who when healed, will unleash itself against us yet again, will earn or rekindle the undying historical enmity of a whole people, nation and state, adding to the toxicity of an already volatile and violent region. (These are the strictly personal views of the writer). (Courtesy: Island)