M.I.A. and the bogey of genocide in Sri Lanka

Monday, 02 March 2009
Last Updated Monday, 02 March 2009

By Dr. Muttukrishna Sarvananthan I listened to the interview of Tavis Smiley of the Public Service Broadcasting (PBS) with Mathangi (aka Maya) Arulpragasam, a hip-hop artist (stage name M.I.A.- Missing in Action), who has been nominated for Grammy and Oscar Awards for 2009.

Maya was born in Sri Lanka, so she claims (though I cannot confirm this fact but give her the benefit of the doubt) but lived most part of her life first in India and then in the UK and currently a British citizen, to the best of my knowledge. I don't think she has visited Sri Lanka ever since her family migrated to India in the early 1980s (and later to the UK), to the best of my knowledge. Misinformation Most of what M.I.A. said about the civil war in Sri Lanka during the course of the aforementioned interview was misinformation at best, blatant lies at worse, either due to ignorance or deceit. "It is ironic that I am the only Tamil, turned out to be the only voice for the Tamil people in the Western media" thundered M.I.A., a claim that smacks of self indulgence and echoes the claim of the LTTE that it is the sole representative of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. A claim accepted by very few Tamils in Sri Lanka or in the diasporas. "There is a genocide going on, systematic genocide since 1983, Tamils being 20 percent of the population getting wiped out. 350,000 stuck in the battle zone getting wiped out. There are 4,000 Tamil Tiger soldiers but the Sri Lankan government, a million soldiers big, wants to wipe out the whole Tamil population," claims the self-appointed spokesperson and savior of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. I can forgive M.I.A. for her lack of understanding of the meaning of 'genocide' because she is not educated enough to understand such terms. I can refer her to an elaborate recent interview with Dr. Franklin Lamb by International Lawyers Without Borders. According to a statement issued by the United Nations on February 16, 2009, the LTTE is abusing Tamil civilians in the conflict zone as a human shield and shooting and killing civilians attempting to flee the conflict zone. The UN also highlighted the fact that children under the age of 14 are forcibly recruited by the LTTE to fight this futile war. Is not the sacrifice of the Tamil children for a lost cause, a genocide of the next generation of the Tamil community? When and how did M.I.A. count 350,000 Tamils in the battle zone? How did she know that there are one million soldiers in the Sri Lankan armed forces? Tamils wiped out? As a person who has undertaken post-conflict needs assessment in the conflict zones in early 2003 and post-tsunami needs assessment in early 2005 for the UN (mostly in LTTE-controlled territories), I can authoritatively say that there are only about 100,000-150,000 people in the battle zone (i.e. LTTE-held area in the Wanni) as of mid-February 2009, which amounts to a mere 0.50 - 0.75 % of the total population of Sri Lanka (circa 20 million). So, how on earth can she claim that Tamils accounting for 20% of the population are being wiped out? Of course, unacceptable numbers of innocent Tamil civilians are being killed in the past few weeks by both sides, which is certainly a cause for grave concern. To the best of my knowledge, there are only about 300,000 personnel in the police and three armed forces (army, air force and the navy) of Sri Lanka, and not a million as M.I.A. claims. Two ethnicities M.I.A. also claimed that there are "two ethnicities - majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils" in Sri Lanka, which is factually incorrect. There are, in fact, several ethnic communities living in Sri Lanka - Sinhalese, Tamils of North and East, Muslims (though bulk of them speak Tamil they prefer to be identified as a separate ethnicity), Hill-country Tamils (migrants from Tamil Nadu state in India during the British colonial rule), Malays, Burghers, Chinese, Veddahs (indigenous people), Sindhis, Bohras, Memons, etc. The self-professed "only voice for the Tamils in the Western media" left out some other 'truths' of the civil war in Sri Lanka. Perhaps, because she has been traveling around the world as a "refugee" she has not been in touch with what was happening in her imagined homeland. Cannot she remember the truth that LTTE massacred hundreds of Muslim worshipers in two mosques in Eravur and Kattankudy in the Batticaloa District (Eastern Province) in 1990? Cannot she remember the truth that innocent Sinhalese villagers were hacked to death by machetes and swords by the LTTE throughout this nasty civil war in the Eastern and Northern Provinces? Could not she remember the truth that nearly 100,000 Muslims were evicted from their homes at gunpoint in the Northern Province by the LTTE in 1990? Muslims were given only 72 hours (in many cases only 24 hours) notice to vacate their historical habitats and were not allowed to take their furniture or consumer durables along with them. Was not the massacre at the mosques genocide? Was not the forcible eviction of Muslims from the north ethnic cleansing? "Tamil civilians do not have the right to speak or right to think, right to live," so goes celebrity untruths of M.I.A. who has not even visited Sri Lanka in the past 25 years or more to make this sweeping claim. I myself (a Tamil from Northern Sri Lanka) have been criticizing the Sri Lankan government on matters of economic policies, human rights violations by the security forces, corruption, transparency and accountability of public finances, etc. in public forums such as the media. Of course, I am fortunate to be still alive, but not many other critics of the government are, particularly media personnel, in the past three years. These excesses by the security forces are nowhere near a genocidal situation. Whether M.I.A. wins the Grammy and/or the Oscar or not, M.I.A., an epitome of the art of deception by some impervious and insular Tamils among the diasporas, deserves a naattu patrallar (person affectionate to the country or patriot) award from the demon god of the Wanni. In any event, poor civilians caught up in this vicious civil war would have never heard of M.I.A. or hip-hop music, nor are they interested. This kind of celebrity untruths will boomerang on the worldwide Tamil community as liars of the first order. Even the actual truths will be construed as untruths or at least suspected by the international community. As an ethnic Tamil myself, on the one hand I am proud of M.I.A. being nominated for the Grammy and Oscar Awards, on the other hand, I am disgraced by her blatant lies on television on behalf of "all Tamils" in Sri Lanka (and beyond), whereas nobody has given her permission to represent all Tamils. As a learned person, I have bit of advice for M.I.A. and the like, members of Tamil diasporas around the world; "It is preferable to tell the truth, small in its dimensions, than a large lie artfully embellished." (Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, 1985, Guerrilla Warfare, Manchester: University Press, pp146).Courtesy: thesundayleader.lk