

---

## London Kills Me

Wednesday, 11 March 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 11 March 2009

by Prof Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process British parliament held one and a half hour debate on Sri Lanka on 5 February 2009 and members of all parties demanded a ceasefire in Vanni, demanded justice for the Tamil people, and demanded that humanitarian assistance be allowed through. They emphatically stated that there cannot be a military solution, and that there needs to be a political one. They suggested appointing a special envoy to report back directly to the Prime Minister, going to the United Nations Security Council, and also suspending the Sri Lankan Government from the Commonwealth.

A few years ago Hanif Kureishi made a film with the above title. It was not a success, unlike his two previous films which were sharply critical of Asian communities in Britain. The third film may not have been so good, but it also struck me at the time that perhaps the British establishment was not quite so happy about the English being at the butt end of criticism &ndash; at least by an Asian, though a British director might have got away with it. The title of the film came to mind last week, when it seemed that the Tigers were making their last stand in London as well as on the beaches north of Mullaitivu. Sri Lanka was the victim of a series of blows which were doubtless intended to knock us out during the meeting in Geneva of the Human Rights Council, at which we were told some European countries were attempting to arrange a special session on Sri Lanka. Not entirely coincidentally, these blows originated in London, beginning with the BBC misquoting the ICRC and then Bishop Tutu leading a group of swans onto that most prestigious of stages, the London Times. Last year there had been an attempt, led by the hugely entertaining then British Ambassador in Geneva, Nick Thorne, to have a motion on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council. This was avoided, largely because of the efforts of our own ambassador, Dayan Jayatilaka, as Thorne indicated in telling me that our ambassador thought he had won &ndash; but Thorne also added that we should wait and see. His replacement however struck me as a much calmer sort of man, much less competitive, Peter Hayes to Dominic Chilcott perhaps. At the same time one should not forget, as I was gently reminded by yet another British official, that they all represent the same policy, as expressed by the Foreign Secretary, who has been as avuncular to both Sri Lanka and India as only a bright young Oxonian could be. But therein lies the rub. The policy may be the same, but the manner in which it is expressed leads to different reactions, and that in turn can contribute to shifts in policy. Certainly the British have throughout history been famous for having two sides to their head. If there is always an official circumspect one, they have also had a predilection for the buccaneers who sweep the country along on a path that their more responsible counterparts half fear, half admire. As always, and this is why one loves them so much, the British are the best analysts of these little quirks. John le Carre does it dramatically, Paul Scott with greater analytical skill, as in his superb assessment of how the bounder Merrick pushed the well meaning Robin White along a path of racist oppression. But all this fiction is no stranger than for instance the Jameson Raid that led to the British conquest of all South Africa, or even the bizarre history of General Gordon, who precipitated the British takeover of the Sudan when he had been sent in to lead them out. So, while one is quite content to believe that the official British approach is support for the Sri Lankan government in its struggle against terrorism, the amount of unsolicited support now for the Tigers is quite startling. And it is not new. After all, when the poor Norwegians were criticized for the Tiger use of vehicles belonging to Norwegian People's Aid, it turned out that there were no Norwegians near the place, only Britishers. It might only be coincidence that Britishers were heads of all the NGOs that make up Solidar, the unregistered entity that encompassed not only NPA but also ASB. It might only be coincidence that Solidar and its components seem to have mopped up enormous amounts of aid funding, including much of what is supposedly UNHCR money. It might even be coincidence that the Head of Solidar was the most vociferous of all NGO representatives in demanding access to the Vanni. But a little bit of John le Carre goes a long way in making one wonder what precisely is the romance the separate state the Tigers were setting up had for these adventurers. Now, with the Brits in Sri Lanka not able to renew their relationship with the Tigers, the scene has shifted to London, where the more dubious British MPs are plaguing the poor Foreign Secretary with questions. He may have done his best not to let down a friendly country, but TamilNet was able to claim that he had agreed with the suggestion that genocide was being practised in Sri Lanka. Then another MP actually lent his blessing to the funeral celebration of the poor young man who burnt himself to death in Geneva. The Times and the Telegraph have gone overboard in attacking the Sri Lankan government, and they are joined now by even the Harrow Times, if TamilNet is to be believed. What is all this about? The British government may want peace and stability, but for adventurers a rogue state they could influence would be a pride and joy. Unlike the Americans, who have a distinctly important role in the world, or the Indians, who are just establishing themselves in one, the British have never got over their decline from being top nation. Like Ronald Merrick, trying to warm his hands before a fire that was going out, there are individuals who would like to command an influence they cannot find on their own. To drive the agenda then of particular journals is not difficult, given that not many people really know much about Sri Lanka, and are content to believe what they are told. And so we have the BBC misquoting the ICRC, we have a UN spokesman referring to the ICRC which means that what the BBC falsely claimed the ICRC said is attributed to the UN, we have the BBC saying that, since the Economist said the same they did, they must both be right and the ICRC clarification can be ignored &ndash; in short, it must be so because the British say it is so. If all this were mere romanticism it would be understandable and even perhaps excusable. But underlying this is the very real danger that this sort of pronouncement could lead to the Tigers being let off the hook. It would be useful then if the sensible part of the British character reasserted itself, and told the adventurers that enough is enough, and that they should stay quiet until terrorism is eradicated &ndash; when, surely, given the Sri Lankan romance with all things British, they can return in triumph to advise us on everything from English to the rehabilitation of terrorists. Courtesy: Island.lk