Jonathan Kay: A response to my (many, many) Tamil-Canadian critics …

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by Jonathan Kay Jonathan Kay Yesterday, I put up a blog post (subsequently re-purposed into an editorial) denouncing the pro-Tamil-Tiger protestors who were part of the demonstration that paralyzed downtown Toronto on Monday. "The rally that took place in Toronto on Monday was not just, as organizers claimed, an expression of support for Tamil civilians in war-torn Sri Lanka," I wrote. "Many of the participants carried flags of the Tamil Tigers, a terrorist group that practices suicide bombings and abducts children to use as soldiers. (In 2006, Canada’s federal government officially designated the Tamil Tigers a terrorist group, a move that criminalized the group’s fund-raising efforts in this country.) Some of the banners displayed on Monday also depicted Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, a wanted mass murderer who personally authorizes the acts of terrorism the group has committed over the last three decades … Imagine for a moment, if the protestors had instead been Arab or Muslim. Would Stephen Harper, Michael Ignatieff, Dalton McGuinty and David Miller be silent if 120,000 supporters of Hamas and Hezbollah paralyzed downtown Toronto as they chanted slogans and waved flags praising groups that slaughter Jews? … The Sinhalese Sri Lankan victims of Tamil Tiger terrorism are no less deserving of support than the Jewish residents of Ashkelon or Sderot." Following publication of the blog post, I received upwards of 100 emails from angry readers — most of them self-identified Tamil Canadians — who found my comments ignorant, bigoted, offensive — or all three. While I cannot comprehensively summarize all my naysayers' criticisms, let me try to give a thumbnail rundown of their three main arguments: (#1) The Tamil Tigers aren't terrorists. They are freedom fighters. (#2) The Tamil Tigers may resort to rough tactics, but what the Sri Lankan government does to Tamil civilians is worse. Colombo's forces are the "real terrorists." (#3) The Tamil Tigers, unlike Islamist terrorists, have no designs on Canada or other Western nations. Their dispute is with Sri Lanka's government only — and so any comparison with al-Qaeda et al is unfair. I don't find any of these arguments particularly convincing. But so many Tamil-Canadian readers emailed me — often with long, carefully detailed arguments — that I feel the need to respond to them in some way. Regarding #1: The line between terrorists and freedom fighters can admittedly be a fuzzy one in some contexts (see, e.g., South Africa's Apartheid-era ANC, or Afghanistan's Reagan-era mujahadeen). That said, we live in Canada, which means that the official view of the Canadian government means something when we discuss these issues. In the case of the Tamil Tigers, the group was put on Ottawa's official list of banned terrorist entities in 2006, which means that, for purposes of Canadian law, the Tamil Tigers are terrorists, full stop. I don't care how strong are one's emotional ties to Sri Lanka — if you live in this country, you have to pay heed to our law. It's also worth mentioning that the Tigers engage in classic terrorist tactics, including wanton slaughter of civilians, suicide bombings, political assassinations, etc. Moreover, the Tigers have systematically coerced children into fighting in their ranks, dealt ruthlessly with dissident Tamils who opposed their brutal methods, and even used coercive tactics to extract financial "donations" from Tamils abroad — including here in Canada. Even if you embrace the cause of a free and independent Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka, you cannot reasonably dispute the fact that the Tamil Tigers are a violent group that has often resorted to the most discredited and barbaric methods of combat imaginable. Regarding #2: I have looked at the available reports about Sri Lankan abuses, and I will concede that the Sri Lankan military has often, itself, behaved in a brutal manner. In many instances, civilians have died unnecessarily. Unfortunately, the same is true of every counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism campaign known to humankind — from Israel to Chechnya to Afghanistan to Iraq. When a government finds itself locked in combat with a guerrilla/terrorist force that fights from amidst a civilian population and uses human shields — as the Tamil Tigers are now doing — innocents inevitably die. (This week, a spokesman for The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights declared: "The LTTE, the Tamil Tigers, are reported to be continuing to hold civilians as human shields, and to have shot at civilians trying to leave the area they control. They are also believed to have been forcibly recruiting civilians, including children, as soldiers.") Regarding #3: This is a fair point, so far as it goes: It's true that the Tamil Tigers' political ambitions end at the sea — unlike those of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, whose jihad is global in scope. But then, the whole point of the international war on terror is that civilized nations must band together to fight all terrorist groups, not just the ones that directly target them. This is the main reason that folks like me were so up in arms about the way that the Liberals soft-peddled the Tigers problem until they got booted out of office in 2006: It didn't seem to matter to Paul Martin et al that cash contributions solicited (and in some cases extorted) from Tamil-owned businesses in the Toronto suburbs were being used to buy bombs to blow up civilians 10,000 miles away. If you take the view that an innocent human life is an innocent human life, no matter where that human is located, then Canada had a moral duty to criminalize Tiger fundraising — something Stephen Harper had the courage to do. In closing, I should say that I recognize the sense of empathic anguish many Canadian Tamils feel as the Sri Lankan government closes in on the last Tamil Tiger enclave in northern Sri Lanka. Tens of thousands of civilians are trapped in the affected area, and several thousand are believed to have died already. These people deserve the world's sympathy. But few Canadians are going to be moved to express such sympathy if they open their newspapers and TV sets and see pictures of Canadian Tamils waving the flag of a banned terrorist organization. jkay@nationalpost.comCourtesy: Nationalpost.com