"Vanangamann" ship is arrogant intrusion combined with provocation and diversionary intent

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by Dayan JayatillekaLet me get this right. Two hundred and thirteen years since the first British colonial ships landed in Sri Lanka, a ship is setting sail from Britain, launched at an event with banners and posters (Vanangaman: "Mercy Mission to Wanni") bearing the map of Tamil Eelam, patronized by politicians and personalities of the former colonial occupier; a ship which hopes to enter the territorial waters of Sri Lanka without our permission and in violation of our sovereignty, at a time when our Navy is involved in the closing battles against a separatist terrorist army. This is an arrogant intrusion combined with provocation and intertwined with diversionary intent. While there is no doubt that what this Vanangamania deserves is the sort of treatment that Sir Francis Drake or Sir Walter Raleigh would have administered to any similar ship sailing for the British Isles, such a reaction would doubtless be an error (remember JRJ's '87 response to the Indian Red Cross boats?) and play into the hands of those who are mounting this diversionary raid so as to entrap us into a move that will trigger an external outcry which would interrupt our ongoing offensive against the encircled Tigers. Absurd Analogies One of the strangest features of the Sri Lankan conflict is that both sides, or more correctly, elements on both sides, see themselves as the Israelis or as an Israel, while neither has the qualifications to consider themselves so. The flip side of this fantasy is that each side tries to &ldguo; Palestinianize &rdguo; the other. The Tamil ultra-nationalists have long seen themselves as the Jews of South Asia, deserving of their version of Israel, an independent state for 80 million Tamils, not so much to inhabit as to identify with. An early, renowned gunfighter of the LTTE, Raghavan, now in exile on London, related to Ahilan Kadirgamar the seemingly strange combination of ideological roles models that inspired Velupillai Prabhakaran: Adolph Hitler's Mein Kampf and on the other, the Zionist model. Now this is an impossible contradiction only if one is unfamiliar with the history of Zionism, in which there were two broad tendencies, a social democratic, labor-movement based secular left, represented by the Haganah, Palmach and the Histradut, and a radical, terrorist Rightwing represented by the Irgun and the Stern gang. Jabotinsky, the leading figure of this latter tendency was known to have sympathies with European fascism and derived some inspiration from the Hitlerian movement. Thus it was with Prabhakaran. In this identification Prabhakaran is not alone. The veteran Marxist V. Karalasingham identified and criticized this pro-Zionist ideology in the Tamil federal party leadership decades ago. The Tamil Eelam project continues to model itself on the founding of Israel. The recent World Tamil Forum meeting in London, organized by the British Tamil Forum and attended by many Western luminaries in and out of office, endorsed four resolutions, one of which designated the war conducted by the Sri Lankan state as genocidal and the Tigers as the authentic representatives of the Tamil people. This and other similar meetings are clearly an attempt to secure something along the lines of an updated version of the Balfour declaration. At the time of the Balfour Declaration, the Arabs were a majority in British mandate Palestine, but decades later, they were a dispossessed people on whose traditional lands a new state had been erected. As Sri Lanka's Secretary Defense has recently said, the LTTE's captured documents and maps show that its plan was for a large Tamil Eelam. This was the thinking behind the ISGA and the PTOMS, which if they had taken shape on the ground would have been the same kind of intermediate steps used to turn the Arab Palestinians into a minority. We Sinhalese would have become like Palestinians. This project goes on unabated and must be resisted. We must also resist the temptation and it must be said, the folly, of seeing ourselves as an Israel. Unlike the neighbors of Israel, our neighbors are far more powerful than we are, and will simply not countenance the Palestinianisation of the Tamils of the North and east. This is the lesson that President Jayewardene and then National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali learned in the 1980s, when they surreptitiously introduced techniques of settler-colonization, tactics of massive retaliation, and West Bank model occupation. Our neighbor ratcheted up, covertly and by proxy, levels of pain upon the Sri Lankan state that were impossible to withstand, leading finally to overt intervention. Mental Maps As the conventional war approaches its climactic phase, Sri Lanka must plan for the morning after. Doubtless the extremists on both sides are, the Tamil Eelamists for a protracted struggle in which the emphasis initially shifts to the international battleground, and Sinhala chauvinists who plan for a hard and permanent occupation. Both sides see themselves as Zionists, though neither are, except perhaps in ideological terms. The struggle is for the future is best illustrated by maps, both real and mental ones. The pro-Tiger Diaspora still dreams of the map of Tamil Eelam which is brandished at all demonstrations and will continue to be for a while. The Sinhala chauvinists fantasize a map in which the Tamil and Muslim majority areas are rediscovered to be ancient Sinhala or Buddhist sites, and renamed, reclaimed not just from the Tigers and the project of a separate state, but from the Tamils and Muslims. The battle of the maps makes for a bitter peace, not a better place. Each of these maps, the one which represents division and dismemberment guarantees the brandishing of the one for coercive, hegemonic homogenization. This reflects a larger and parallel process: the more that the so-called international community - actually the western liberal democracies - engage in contacts with Tiger arms dealers and proceed to justify such conduct on humanitarian grounds; the more that western capitals are the site of gatherings graced by western political personalities at which the Tigers are dubbed "the authentic representatives of the Tamil people" (as if Hitler were an inauthentic representative of the German people!); the more the West undermines the anti-Tiger Tamil political current; the more its own designated Tamil moderates boycott the political mainstream and prove themselves in thrall to the Tigers; the more that western double standards and hypocrisy are in evidence on their attitudes towards terrorism in South Asia; the more there appears to be a compact between Tamil secessionism and terrorism and the West; the more that memories of colonial discrimination and privilege are revived by such conduct; then the more difficult is to combat the growing stranglehold of " Sinhalese hard-line elements " that is bewailed in the quality Western press by those self-same Western diplomats and representatives. What we need is a third map,

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cartographic and cognitive. That should not be too difficult at one level, because it is a map of the status quo, a map of Sri Lanka as it is. What has to change is our mentalities and attitudes, not the reality. Our mentalities have to change to reflect more accurately the reality of Sri Lanka. That reality is of a pluralist society; a country in which the narrowing Northern area and the top part of the East are preponderantly ethnic Tamil, while the Eastern province comprises almost equally of the three main ethnic groups while being preponderantly Tamil speaking in linguistic terms. Recognition of reality consists, in the first instance, not of radical reform but of the full adherence to our basic law, the Sri Lankan Constitution. Adherence assumes activation of the entirety of the Constitution of which the 13th amendment is a component Fantasy vs. Vision The fantasy of the pro-Tiger Tamil Diaspora cannot be defeated purely by the mobilization of Sinhala nationalism. Put at its crudest, 18 million people cannot match the reach of 80 million Tamils. The Tamil Zionist project can only be buried by a strategic move which cuts them off from India and the West, which in turn can be achieved only by the Sri Lankan side swiftly accommodating itself to the reform recommendations of those whose assistance we need to win the next stage of the struggle, namely our friends and neighbors. If rejected, ignored or frontally confronted, the moderate international consensus will rapidly become " radicalized" to the point of considering a possible solution outside the borders of the Sri Lankan state formation. There is no guarantee that such a program will be supported only by the west and not by India. What then are the contours of the moderate external consensus? A report in the Asian Tribune by M. Rama Rao, India Editor, on the recent visit by the Indian PM's Secretary Mr. Nair says: &ldguo:Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon, who met reporters Monday, confirmed the visit saving "With military operation against LTTE appearing to near an end. India has asked Sri Lanka to take steps towards &Isquo; credible devolution ' of powers to Tamil-dominated northern region". He added that Nair in his talks with Sri Lankan officials stressed the need for taking steps which can be 'seen as the key step in meeting the needs of all minority communities, especially the Tamil community'. India believes that political package to the minority Tamil community is the ultimate solution to the ethnic conflict, the Indian Foreign Secretary said. PM's emissary's discussions also focused on ways by which India can help Sri Lanka in reconstruction and rehabilitation of the northern region, which is being freed from the control of LTTE. Tamil Nadu chief minister M Karunanidhi appears to have been taken into confidence before mounting the Nair mission to Colombo". (March 31, 2009) Meanwhile the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Hearings on Sri Lanka showed us what the American elite consensus on Sri Lanka is for the moment. Ex-ambassador Dr Jeff Lunstead's testimony does not urge talks with the Tigers or a ceasefire or even federalism. Instead he says " Sri Lanka's political system, which centralizes power in Colombo, needs to be changed to devolve power to local areas. This will allow Tamils--and indeed all Sri Lankans--to have a greater say in how they are governed and how they lead their lives…" and reiterates the need to "engage seriously in political reform… genuine devolution of power…" Any discourse with and about the Sri Lankan Tamils which is patronizingly integrationist but lacks any reference let alone commitment to devolution and the 13th amendment, falls outside the parameters of the international and regional consensus, and is akin to an Israeli or Palestinian discourse that fails to mention the two state solution. Such a discourse leaves open ideological and political space for the Tamil Diaspora to gather international support for its project. (These are the strictly personal views of the writer). Courtesy: transcurrent.com