Where real prejudice is to be found

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A report from the World Conference on Racism

The World Conference Against Racism being held at the United Nations in Geneva this week is proving rather interesting, and not just because of the well reported dispute over the Iranian President's speech. Western diplomats ran out when he spoke about the racism of the Israeli state, but they retook their seats a few minutes later.
In the Assembly Hall, member states have been sharing their experiences in tackling discrimination since the landmark event in Durban. Speaking frankly about the difficulties they have encountered along the way, from the growing suspicion of Muslim communities in the West since 9/11 to the South African disturbances, delegates are reaffirming the commitment of their respective governments to putting an end to racism. Concrete suggestions for action are being made as well. Douglas Devananda, Minister of Social Services and Social Welfare, addressed the Assembly Hall on Monday. He emphasised his personal journey from armed struggle to the heart of government, in line with the transformation of the state, and talked about the determination of the LTTE to kill him for it. Urging delegates to call on the LTTE to release the hostages in Mullaitivu, which he explained was the most important problem facing the Tamil community, he stressed that a political solution to their grievances was already underway, with the elections in the Eastern Province last year. He also confirmed the Government's undertaking to fully implement the Thirteenth Amendment, and to go beyond this, including by the establishment of a Second Chamber based on the Provinces.In his speech, Minister Devananda also praised Rishad Bathiudeen, Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, his colleague in the Sri Lankan delegation. Minister Bathiudeen was himself a victim of LTTE terrorism, Minister Devananda said, being one of the thousands of Muslims who were forcibly displaced from the North. While all this constructive dialogue was going on, Sri Lankan NGO employees were running around the side events, chucking whatever mud they could dredge up from the bottom of their imaginations at the Government. At a forum about the situation in Asia, Nimalka Fernando, head of the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism, spread as much disinformation as possible in the time allowed to her. Nimalka started by apologising for being a member of the majority Sinhala community, and also a Christian, presumably because she did not want to upset the Robert Evans theory that everyone in Sri Lanka is either a Sinhala Buddhist or a Tamil Hindu. She quoted the case of a worker for the National Christian Conference who was interrogated by the Terrorism Investigation Department on his way out of Katunayake Airport last month, to suggest that people from the minority Tamil community would be in danger if they came abroad to speak up about racism. She omitted to mention that the person in question, Shantha Fernando, probably no relation, was not Tamil. Her plaintive cry obviously does not make sense, given that Nimalka has no problem circumnavigating the globe every few months to do a lot worse, with no ill effects. Indeed, she had only just left Geneva after the Human Rights Council sessions when she landed back there again. Such dedication to work is rather praiseworthy, and the Peace Secretariat certainly wishes Nimalka a lot more enjoyable trips to distant parts of the world. As pointed out by Deputy Solicitor General Yasantha Kodagoda, who participated on behalf of the Sri Lankan delegation, her little diversions were also highly mischievous. The Government is represented by two Cabinet Ministers, one a Tamil and the other a Muslim, so Nimalka's depiction of Sri Lanka as a discriminatory state was rather unfair. All she could manage by way of justification for her claim were two hackneyed quotes from statements made by individuals who were clearly expressing no more than personal opinions, given that what they said did not concur with stated policy. Indeed, the Government's position has been repeated on numerous occasions, largely for the sake of the people like Nimalka who need to hear things several hundred times before they start to understand. Interestingly, she was supported by a gentleman from Britain's Commission for Racial Equality, which seemed to have forgotten its mandate. He quoted a few unsavoury remarks by JR Jayewardene as proof that Sri Lanka was overrun by racists, as if it would be quite reasonable to present statements by Winston Churchill, such as his characterisation of Gandhi as a half-naked fakir, as representative of modern Britain.Nimalka and her newfound friend dismissed Minister Devananda and Minister Bathiudeen as stooges. She said that the Government could parade any number of Tamils and Muslims in Geneva, but it would mean nothing. Whether the people who voted for them would agree, or indeed those who benefit from their assistance in their capacities in the Ministry of Social Services and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services respectively, areas in which unfortunately large numbers of Tamils and Muslims need help, does not seem likely. The United Nations is a key forum, and Minister Devananda is the first Tamil politician from the North to make an important policy statement there. Nimalka did not appear to have been listening, but there were plenty of open-minded delegates who found his speech very useful in understanding the current situation.

It is even more ridiculous when one considers that the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism, of which Nimalka was introduced as both the President and Director, once again demonstrating her industrious nature, was described as a membership organisation. However, the Peace Secretariat discovered some time ago that the Treasurer of the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism had been dead for five years, and was perhaps no more active earlier, so it is clear that Nimalka Fernando represents nobody but herself, which is probably more than enough. The fact is that Sri Lankan NGO employees are often the very embodiment of prejudice. Uninterested in debate on real issues, they tend to avoid interaction with those who disagree with them, presumably for fear of not being able to substantiate their claims. Even if the Government were perfect in its actions, which no administration could ever be, they would still be groping around for a bit of dirt to fling. Fortunately, there are not many of them in Geneva. The focus is on the delegations, and rightly so. The United Nations is a forum for cooperation between member states, after all. In addition to Minister Devananda and Minister Bathiudeen, Sri Lanka is also represented by

Ambassador Dayan Jayatilleka and Deputy Solicitor General Yasantha Kodagoda, in addition to the Peace Secretariat. Apart from feeling obliged to drop in on Nimalka's moment of glory, they spent much of their time meeting Ministers and other representatives of countries genuinely concerned about events in Sri Lanka.

This situation is probably a corollary of the furore over the Iranian President. Western governments and foundations who paid for the massive civil society presence at Durban were not best pleased to find the organisations they had brought from all over the world agitating to single out Israel for criticism. The West assumes that people they pay for will always do only what they were created for, which is to attack states Western governments disapprove of. Despite 9/11, they have not learned their lesson but, give Nimalka a few more years, and she might drive them round the bend even more successfully than the Taliban.
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