
A miasma of suspicion

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Prof Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process U.N. humanitarian official John Holmes, left, speaks to internally displaced ethnic Tamil civilians, during a visit to a displacement camp in Manik Farm, Vavuniya Monday, April 27, 2009. (AP) I have been astonished recently by the unwillingness of those who call themselves the International Community to assist properly the Sri Lankans who have recently sought refuge from the Tigers. They seem determined to keep them in tiny tents, as opposed to the relatively decent houses that were originally designed by government. Even more worryingly, they go on and on about how toilets cannot be built to anything more than basic specifications, which means they turn disgusting very quickly.

Much of this grudging approach has come from the UN, but in fairness to them they claim that they are being held rigidly to basic norms by their donors. I was surprised by this, since I had thought the West would have been more sympathetic to Tamils about whom they had been expressing so much concern recently, rightly so given how much they have suffered, in being driven from pillar to post as the Tigers held them tightly to their bosoms without allowing any chance of escape. Initially I thought this was typical of the hypocrisy which I had come to associate with some of the Europeans, though not previously the Americans, who had been practical and helpful in the East, almost as good as the Asians and multilateral agencies. But when even they turned strange, I thought there must be some other reason for this. And so it proved. Gradually it became clear to me that these Westerners were frightened that the government actually wanted to keep these displaced Sri Lankans in Vavuniya for ever, and that we hoped to start settlements of Sri Lankans from the South in the Northern Province. Now it is conceivable that there are some Sri Lankans who dream of doing this, carried away by what Israel has managed to achieve with Western support in this regard. But even the most imaginative of such must realize that we are not Israel, and to get away with such conduct you need to hold a very special place in Western hearts. This can come from guilt based on the appalling way in which the West treated Jews for centuries, culminating in the horrors of Nazism. The more cynical would say that pretence of guilt is an excuse for a suddenly discovered kinship, after centuries of othering, kinship based on an even more systematic othering of people of a markedly different sort. But, whatever it be, the Sri Lankans cannot hope to get away with such conduct, and no one in government seems to have even considered such a course. But Westerners, perhaps seeing what has happened elsewhere, and seeing parallels in that Israel continues to claim that such settlements are essential for security reasons, have obviously begun to think that this is the agenda. They have discussed this even with Sri Lankans they believe sympathetic to their views, though sadly they had not directly addressed the issue with government. This is a pity, because conversely people in government are worried that constant talk of immediate resettlement is designed to resurrect terrorism as soon as possible. I think this is as nonsensical a suspicion as the other, but it can be argued that there is a greater rationale for it. After all, never before has there been such concern for swift resettlement. The West seems to have cared not at all for the Muslims driven out of the North by the LTTE and, two years ago, when the government started a policy of rapid resettlement in the East, this was attacked on the grounds that the people were being forced back. Since therefore swift resettlement has never previously been prominent before on Western agendas, naturally there are suspicions that there must be ulterior motives. And though I have no doubt that the motive for most is the contrasting suspicion noted above, it is certainly possible that there are a few who, not as officials but as romantics, would relish the idea of a continuing struggle in which they could strut about as the patrons of the brave underdogs, or whatever they see the next generation of Tigers as encompassing. Or indeed the present generation. Mr Miliband's refusal to call on the Tigers to surrender has caused widespread uncertainty, even amongst diplomats from other countries who cannot comprehend the failure of the West to salute and promote success against terror. Concern for Tamils can certainly be understood by everyone, but that the British should continue to consider the Tigers synonymous with the Tamils is extremely worrying. This fuels suspicions, and leads to greater worries about the manipulation of swift resettlement. That in turn can fuel the suspicions of the more innocent Westerners. Underlying this all is the fact that there is still a threat of continuing terrorism in the North. We know perfectly well that, though the East was cleared, pockets of Tigers continued to operate, and caused mayhem. Indeed the failure of the so-called independent media beloved of the so-called international community to dwell on the massacres perpetrated by Tiger guerrillas in the East has added to the feeling that no one really cares about terrorism unless it targets them. Thus, in addition to the obvious need for demining, it is also necessary for the government to clear pockets of resistance, whilst also finding the caches of arms that the Tigers would doubtless have laid down throughout the North. The British indeed know all about this type of operation, having started it off in South Africa to clean out the Boers, and then brought it to a fine art in Malaysia. In both instances they corralled the inhabitants who they thought might otherwise provide sustenance and support to their enemies. It is no wonder then that it is the British who are most vociferous about the welfare centres, perhaps because of guilt as to what they themselves did, more probably, knowing the British, because they have forgotten the horrors they perpetrated in the days when they ran the world, and genuinely think this is a strange new Sri Lankan mechanism. Only that can explain their bizarre use of the word internment, which for them meant taking people from their homes and locking them up, whereas here what has happened is that people have of their own volition sought refuge with us. There is no doubt then that we have to be careful, and the world must understand that. At the same time, we can easily start resettlement in areas which are relatively safe, and at the same time develop programmes to win hearts and minds, in a manner that is essential, since the techniques of the British against Boers and Communists will not succeed in these days of advanced communications technology. In any case, once we have got rid of the main Tiger threat, and the main Tiger leadership, the cleaning out operations in the North should not take more than six months. But, given what seems the last ditch attempt of the British and their friends, including for some bizarre reason the Swiss, to rouse feeling against Sri Lanka so that the Tigers might not have to surrender, it is not surprising that the fear has arisen that the West wants the confusion to be worse confounded. The

involvement of the Swiss has indeed given rise to fears that this is all to do with their secretive banking system, and the hoards the Tigers have stashed there, whereas the more likely explanation is the simpler one of sympathy for aggressive demonstrators. Whatever the reason, whether it be simple questions of political advantage and a numbers game, or something much more sinister, or the relatively innocuous fear that we are all thirsting to turn into the Israelis of South Asia, Western behaviour has been so peculiar of late that I can quite understand the suspicions that have begun to burgeon amongst colleagues who normally love Europe and all it stands for. In one sense this is useful, because for too long we have lost touch with the principles of Non-Alignment that once gave us a moral authority in the world, an authority we squandered when J R Jayewardene decided to turn into a hero of the Cold War, and ruined relations with India as well as several other countries. In that sense it is right and proper that now we develop a much more inclusive foreign policy framework, and we must be grateful that this has been thrust upon us, when we would not otherwise have embarked on it ourselves. But at the same time we must remember the principles of Non-Alignment, and not ignore the West either, since that too is not a monolith. President Bush may have been a more reliable ally against terrorism, but the moral fervour of the new administration in America is something we should work with, and we should not allow a few pronouncements based on Tiger and other disinformation to blind us to better more inclusive days ahead. Similarly, Mr Kouchner's visit confirmed what we have long known, that the French are resolute in their opposition to all forms of terror and, while they will quietly address particular issues that worry them, they will not be carried away by post-colonial adventurism. Again Australia, despite heavy pressures, has not hesitated to condemn Tiger atrocities by name, and Canada too, despite the predilections of earlier Liberal politicians, and that particular mindset in its Foreign Ministry, will be more consistent now with a Conservative government and an intellectually principled Liberal leader. And even the British, as so often before, will surely change as the election gets nearer, and change becomes either inevitable or avoidable through more principled measures than pandering to terrorists. As for the Swiss – well, as long as the Human Rights Council continues to work exclusively in Geneva, they will relish crises because their hotel rooms will fill, but they are not really movers and shakers at heart, and will settle down again once other forces cease to drive them. Sri Lanka then should deal sympathetically with genuine suspicions and work to set them at rest. At the same time, we should expect governments that truly care about democracy and pluralism in Sri Lanka – as opposed to fearing what democracy might do to them under sectarian pressure – to understand our suspicions too, and try to set these at rest. Courtesy: Island.lk