
A loss not that significant

Tuesday, 26 May 2009

Last Updated Tuesday, 26 May 2009

P R Kumaraswamy Many of them lost their families, property, nationality, identity and dreams. Simply put everything they had or aspired for. I only lost a few photos. Not my life, passport, money or not even my camera. The person only took off the memory chip but returned my camera. I lost a few pictures taken earlier in the day. What I lost can be replaced with a few euros.

But what was my crime? I took some picture of the Sri Lankan Tamils who were protesting in lush green lawn in front the headquarters of Air France along the Esplanade des Invalides in Paris. As I was walking from the Home des Invalides a group of protestors caught my attention. When I got closer, I recognised that about a hundred Tamils were protesting against the Sri Lankan government. Through their slogans in French, they were drawing the attention of the international community. There were a number of horrific pictures that reminded the passers-by of the brutality of the conflict back home. Only the previous day the Lankan government had announced that LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran has been killed. Were the protesters mourning his death or were they merely protesting the atrocities? No clue. I took a few snaps. Then I noticed a poster of Mahatma Gandhi on the lamppost. The Mahatma was not holding his usual long walking stick but rather an inverse AK-47. I could not ignore the irony of the poster and wanted to take a picture. The black flag that was also tied to the same lamppost was fluttering and blocked the view. I wanted both Mahatma and AK-47 in one frame. This took a little more time and caught the attention of the protestors. As I was moving away, a few young men came towards me and asked something in French. When I expressed in inability, they switched to English: "Which newspapers?" asked one. "Where are you from?" another followed. The third one came to the point, "Why were you taking photos?" Others joined in the chorus. I said it is a public place and hence. Then one of them asked me to show the pictures. When I did, he snatched the camera. "I will delete the pictures, if you want" I struggled. Meanwhile someone was saying, "Passport, passport, Take it." The shorter one who snatched my camera was more daring. In a fraction of second he took off the memory card and returned the camera and said: "Now, you can go." All this happened in under a minute and right in the heart of Paris and in the middle of the day. Scores of people were walking all over the place. Since others surrounded me, none could have noticed what was happening there. I was not the only one who was taking pictures of the protestors. The protest was held only to highlight the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and hence taking pictures should not be an offence, let alone a violation of privacy. The LTTE flag in the lawn clearly indicated that the protestors were sympathisers of the Tigers. Why were young men afraid of me taking photos of a public demonstration in a western capital? Maybe not all the protestors were refugees. Perhaps there were some cadre or potential cadre among them and that they would not like to be captured in camera. I have no idea. But what happened to the scores of others, mostly white tourists who were guilty of the same crime? I was the only tourist with sub-continent features in the area and so it was easier for them to bounce me and take away the photos. Wish those young men had the same courage towards white tourists who were clicking at the protest, both before and after I was intimidated. Perhaps skin colour sets limits to bravado. Unable to decide the next move, I walked ahead and sat on a bench on the other side of the river and looked back at had happened. Not a pleasant thing but I could have lost much more. I decided to walk back along the same route. To avoid further unpleasantness I opted for the other side of the broad road. As I was passing-by, the few men who took away my picture moments ago were staring at me from the other side. I looked back at them. A lone police car was nearby and I passed on quietly. But for my own sake and inner peace, I needed to go back there. So the next day I was there and took pictures that I could not do the previous day. The day was bright and sunny, and the scene was much better and the golden statues atop the pillars across the Seine River were glittering under the sun. That day there was also a demonstration but on a smaller scale. Maybe I went a little earlier. From afar I noticed many tourists who were taking pictures of the protest. But this time I decided to keep a safe distance and walked a street parallel to the main road. Of course no photos also. Why the same mistake twice? The photos I took the previous day were for my personal use. Except for one or two close friends, who has the interest let alone patience to look at amateurish pictures of exotic Paris? They would have remained in my hard disc only to be forgotten soon. Thanks to the lost memory card, the missing pictures are carved in stone. I gained more than I lost. I don't have the photo but what I saw will go with me to my grave: Mahatma Gandhi holding an AK-47 in the heat of Paris.

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Courtesy: Expressbuzz.com