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## July 1983: Resident Evil

Wednesday, 09 July 2008

Last Updated Monday, 21 July 2008

by: Dayan Jayatileka For 1971 Eliot was right -- April was the cruelest month—but wrong for 1983. In '83, it was July. The week 23-29 was the cruelest week of that cruelest month, and perhaps Friday the 29th was the cruelest day, certainly on the streets. Prof. Carlo Fonseka may recall Charles Abeysekera and me turning up and talking to him and Vijaya Kumaratunga, hoping to take him to refugee camps to medically minister, which would prove impossible at that moment with the mobs marching down their very road.

Charlie drove a white Volkswagen, and there were just the two of us on that road with its hellish scenes, the rumors swirling from Gasworks street, a mob pounding someone to a pulp against the wall of the Registry of Motor Vehicles, the juveniles stopping our car and asking for petrol, plastic tube in hand for the siphoning, people emerging from lanes household implements in hand, running from invisible Tigers but looking for Tamils. There are broadly three types of reactions of Sri Lankans. There are those who condemn Tiger atrocities—and the international coverage of July '83—while excusing or glossing over July '83; those who condemn July '83 while excusing or glossing over Tiger atrocities; and those, like myself, and I hope the majority, who condemn both. July '83 cannot remain in code. It must be named for what it was. It was an attack which went on for a week, on the lives and property of unarmed Tamil citizens, perpetrated by racist Sinhalese (and it is said, Muslim) mobs. The entire country is still paying the consequences. There is no legitimate excuse for the atrocities of July '83. The ambush of the 13 soldiers by the LTTE is no excuse. An attack on armed soldiers cannot be a legitimate reason for the savage slaughter of unarmed, non-combatant civilians. The atrocities committed by the Tigers, be it at Anuradhapura, Habarana, Arantalawa, or Colombo on Sinhala civilians cannot justify July '83 either. Nor can the attack on the Dalada Maligawa, the sacred Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. All these, starting with the killing of poor Sinhalese fisher-folk in Naiaru and Kokilai, took place after—not before—July 83. Conversely, July '83 provides no justification for those attacks. Nothing justifies the intentional killing of unarmed, uninvolved civilians by a so-called liberation movement. The US bombing of Cambodia helps us understand the back-story of the Khmer Rouge, but nothing justifies its barbaric, fascist conduct. The other, pseudo-sophisticated excuses won't wash either. It wasn't a reaction to the open economic policies of JR Jayewardene. The first major anti-Tamil riots took place in 1958, two decades before JR's open economy. It wasn't the fault of the JVP, which was framed by the UNP government for the attacks. That framing and proscription of the JVP was one of the triggers for the civil war in the largely Sinhala South, the insurgency and counterinsurgency that cost more lives than the wars in the North-East. Only the ethically cowardly can gain comfort in the observation that only a minority of the majority Sinhalese participated in the attacks of July '83. This is of course, empirically accurate, but the huge arithmetical imbalance between those who perpetrated the violence and those who disapproved or were shocked by it, did not cause that murderous minority to be opposed, or prosecuted after the events. Two more misconceptions about July 83 must be dealt with: that it represents some specifically Sinhalese sin; and that it cannot happen again. From the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1985 following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the riots in Gujarat—with attendant allegations about the role of local law enforcement—right up to the recent violence against Zimbabwean refugees in South Africa, the horror of collective violence against a community can be seen for what it is: a barbarism that none of us are immune from. And yes, it can happen again. There were twenty five years, exactly a quarter century, between the riots of 1958 and those of 1983. This year we are 25 years on from July '83. There is a political aspect, the role of the UNP, in both 1958 and 1983, but the events cannot be reduced to a "reactionary UNP conspiracy". Tarzie Vittachi's Emergency 58 and the issues of Young Socialist edited by Sydney Wanasinghe provide the Ariadne's thread. Bandaranaike's pact with Chelvanayagam had been opposed by the UNP which had marched to Kandy bearing an illuminated map of the island with the Dalada Maligawa in the portion carved out for the Tamil state. Bandaranaike tore up the Pact, it is true, more out of fear of his own supporters among the Buddhist clergy (one of whom who plotted his murder the next year) than the UNP campaign, but the UNP did not stop there. Alone among the political parties, its Sinhala language party paper, and other publications which emanated from its Kelaniya branch (please note) called on the Sinhalese to rise up against the Tamils. Furthermore Lake House, which was then owned by the family which now owns the UNP, carried openly racist propaganda in its Sinhala language publications, while its companion Tamil and English publications were preaching the virtues of moderation and stability. At an international symposium around 1970, in Davao City, in the Philippines, presided over by Harold Evans (then of the Sunday Times, London, now head of Random House, New York) and organized by Tarzie Vittachi, Mervyn de Silva presented a study entitled The Three Voices of Lake House, which painstakingly assembled the evidence of the complicity of the privately owned media in the race riots of 1958. To be fair by the then owners, ("Uncle") Tarzie told me in the mid- 1970s, in his high rise New York apartment overlooking the Hudson river, that it was not all the family members but specifically one offspring of the late DR Wijewardene, a member (but not the chairman) of the board, who was pushing the racist line and pressurizing even Tarzie. The thread leads to 1983, or more precisely, to post 1977. Anti-Tamil rioting took place in 1977, 1979, and 1981, including in the Hill country. In 1983, there were small scale attacks before the month of July, including on Tamil students at Peradeniya University. All this proves that the thesis of July '83 being lamentable but wholly provoked by the ambush of the 13 soldiers is seriously flawed. In 1977, civil society stood firm, forming vigilance committees which patrolled neighborhoods in Colombo. Neville Jayaweera and I were among the many who gathered at Fr Tissa Balasuriya's Centre for Society and Religion which was a locus of resistance, with Godfrey Goonetilleke a leading light of the Citizens Committee for National Harmony (CCNH). In 1979 Fr Paul Caspersz founded the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) of which I was a founder member. Between 1977 and 1979, Mervyn de Silva had launched the Lanka Guardian, the platform and voice of the new bloc. From 1977 to the early 80s, up until '83, the various currents of the Left

acted as a counterweight to racism. On Peradeniya University for instance, radical activists of the Samaja Adhyayana Kavaya (Social Studies Circle) went from hall of residence to hall of residence, cycle chains and rods in hand, deterring and meting out punishment to those whipping up racism against Tamil students. But by July '83, all anti-racist resistance was swept away as by a tidal wave. What had happened in the intervening years? The UNP had a role to play but it was a complex one and it would be dishonest to simply heap all blame on the incumbent administration. When the mob marched from Kanatte (I was present at the funeral and heard the monk's rabble rousing oration) to Ward Place, in the direction of JRJ's home (a few doors from ours), the president's first preoccupation became self preservation. The riot was allowed to go unchecked for fear that it would round on the political leadership. There was also the apprehension that the police and military would not heed the government if orders were given to crackdown. By contrast in 1958, the military obeyed the command of the governor general Sir Oliver Goonetilleke. Several things had changed by 1983. When President Jayewardene finally addressed the nation it was not only too little too late, the note he struck was virtually one of appeasement of the mobs and, it must be added, almost a replay of Mr. Bandaranaike's radio broadcast in 1958! Both said the events were a reflection of the "justifiable anger of the Sinhala people". In 1983, it was only Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa's address on the worst day, Friday 29th that criticized the rioters. Media Minister Ananda Tissa de Alwis attempted to depict it as a Marxist plot. Racism was by no means the exclusive preserve of the UNP. In the last year of the United Front government, some SLFP politicians had led attacks on Tamils in the plantations (I think the names of the estates were Delta, Devon and Sanquhar), causing some fatalities. In the Kandy area, most of those arrested &ndash; justly or unjustly-- in connection with the riots of 1977, belonged to the defeated SLFP. The UNP government's sin was several-fold: abdication, appeasement, ambivalence, and worst of all, enabling the explosion. The wing of the UNP associated with its Kelaniya branch and support base were an important power center in the government of 1977. From there, the goon squads, a proto-militia, radiated out, to attack trade unionists and left wing students. Prof. Gananath Obeyesekere would call it "the institutionalization of political violence". Charges were levelled in Parliament about Tamil lecturers favouring Tamil students, but when Opposition leader Appapillai Amirthalingam called upon the House to appoint a Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate the charges, his plea was ignored. Disgustingly racist propaganda ( I recall a book entitled Sinhalayage Adisi Sathura- The Invisible Foe of the Sinhalese, with a cover illustration of a hirsute-legged Tamil, his sarong tucked up, pointing an inordinately long spear at the Sinhala heartland) was distributed free of charge, in state supplied envelopes and bearing Ministerial seal. The UNP's trade union wing the JSS was not the only offender. In July 83 many of us witnessed the attackers moving around in flatbed trucks belonging to the Mahaweli Board. The ambush of the 13 soldiers was the spark. That spark fell on the fuel of racist propaganda that had been spread from within a section of the state. If not for that fuel, the attack itself would not have resulted in the conflagration that followed. The Tamil separatist Prabhakaran's biggest ally was the state's leading champion of Sinhala supremacy. Yet, it would be intellectually lazy and dishonest to focus only on regime culpability. Racism comes not only from above, but also from below. It has not only a state source but also a social one. Racism can spew from a wing of the establishment but can also have an anti-establishment aspect. July '83 had all of this: it had a social or mass character, not only an establishment one. We saw school children from at least one leading school join the attacks, in sympathy with one of their alumni who had been a victim of the ambush. Obviously their parents, religious guides, teachers and prefects had been unable to inculcate in them the idea that uninvolved, innocent civilians were not valid targets by way of solidarity with their elder brother figures. There was social solidarity between the mobs, the Police, some elements of the military and many monks. The best years of Sri Lanka's progressive intelligentsia came in the wake of July '83, with much soul searching, research and writing, with the Lanka Guardian, the Social Scientists Association, MIRJE and the ICES based Committee for Rational Development (CRD) functioning as creative nuclei. This was short lived, and with bracketing of July '83 by the Anuradhapura massacre of Sinhala pilgrims by the Tigers in 1985, society was split several ways, into shards of opinion that still remain our constitutive components. Some Sinhalese saw in July '83 a vehicle &ndash; the Sinhala street&mdash;which could be deployed against their Establishment rivals and ridden to power, while the others saw in the Tiger massacre in Anuradhapura, an event less horrific than July '83 and a salutary shock to the Sinhala psyche, more of which could usher in peace. The Tamils divided into those who saw the Sinhalese as their enemy and supported Prabhakaran, those who sought to build bridges with the South recalling that most Sinhalese were not in support of the pogrom, and those who felt that the safety and future of the Tamils could be guaranteed only by India. A few of us, Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, rejected both July '83 and Anuradhapura '85, reaching out to each other even after these horrors, in a joint political struggle, shoulder to shoulder, as comrades. We were informed upon, hunted and many murdered, by the extremists of both communities, the JVP (which included today's members of another party) and the LTTE. President Jayewardene would never have thought that turning a Nelsonian eye to the racist propaganda and networking activities of certain powerful Cabinet Ministers would result in a chain reaction of disaster that included July '83, the second Southern insurrection, the Indian airdrop followed by 70,000 foreign troops on Sri Lankan soil, and the end of his longstanding economic vision for the country. July '83 put the Tigers on steroids. Until that time, the other Tamil Eelam groups, none of which were as anti-Sinhalese as the Tigers and several of which were building bridges with the Sinhalese, were the more prominent. After July '83, the humiliation felt by the Tamils found expression in support for the most militarist and racist option, the LTTE. In this, the Tamils showed themselves to be different from the Jews, who despite the Holocaust threw their weight behind the progressive Haganah and Palmach, rather than Jabotinsky's fascist Irgun Zvai Leumi and the Stern gang. Velupillai Prabhakaran is a Tamil Jabotinsky or Jacob Stern. The LTTE's ideology is nothing but Tamil racism and expansionism which seeks not merely to carve out a separate country for the Tamils but to enslave the Sinhalese. The Pongu Tamil demonstration of July 5th 2008 held in Bern Switzerland was accompanied by a leaflet which reads as follows: "&hellip;Let the Sinhalese kneel before the rising Tamils&hellip;Let us

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emphasize that the Liberation Tigers are the sole representatives of the people of Tamils and proclaim loudly the Tamils and proclaim loudly the Tamil principles of the Motherland, Nation and the right of self-rule. The thirst of the Tigers is Tamil Eelam Motherland". Prabhakaran knows that a repetition of July &#83 is perhaps the only thing that can save him from defeat. This is why he is attacking, and will keep on attacking, civilian targets, probably going onto softer and bigger ones, in an Armageddon scenario, rather like Hitler in his last year. A repetition of July &#83 in whatever form, even if it is of a smaller scale or duration, will be reported around the world instantly, triggering a regional R2P. A Yugoslav outcome could be the result. This is especially so with the coinciding electoral cycles in the world&#83s most powerful and most populous democracies. If we are to win the war, reunite the country and catch up with the task of fulfilling our destiny, we must identify and root out the main dangers to our existence -- racism, racial and all other forms of discrimination, prejudice and xenophobia &ndash; and fight for the enthroning of equality and fraternity, reason and freedom. [The writer is chairperson of the UN Human Rights Council&#83s Inter-Governmental Working Group on the effective implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. These are his strictly personal views]. (Courtesy : The Island - Midweek Review )