

Great Celebration of Relief

By Nalin Swaris

On Monday the 18th, it was announced that the entire LTTE leadership including Prabhakaran had been killed and the war against LTTE terrorism was over. The people, notably Sinhalese and Muslims were overwhelmed with joy and relief. The capital Colombo, suburbs, cities, towns and villages erupted with the sound of firecrackers. People began to cook and share milk rice and women beat the traditional rabana. From Welimada to Wellawatte, from Muttur to Mattakuliya, from Pamankade to Alimankade, streets and buildings, willingly or grudgingly, were festooned with the National Flag.

The LTTE's front web journal TamilNet announced that Prabhakaran was not dead but alive and safe. There was some confusion among the jubilant people, since there was no visual proof that the Tiger leader was indeed dead. These claims and the resultant confusion were laid to rest when on Tuesday afternoon. All local TV stations carried pictures of Prabhakaran's corpse laid on a stretcher. The head had to be lifted so that every one could see without any doubt that it was indeed the Suriya Thevan - in rigor mortis shock that he was not immortal like the gods.

Ending his address to the Nation on Tuesday the 17th, the President declared the next day a

public holiday. The celebrations went on all Wednesday, in temples and on street sides there were religious services. There was jubilation with no violence or even any show of animosity towards Tamils. Why should there be? It was a disappointment to those alienated foreign funded agents of the West that there was no display of anti Tamil, Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism. A friend told me on the phone that he heard that there had been one or two cases of harassment of Tamils and that a delegation had gone to Minister Devananda to ask that such incidents would not be repeated. But almost everywhere, the celebrators offered kiribath to everyone without discrimination.

People were parading the streets carrying national flags: processions of three wheelers and bicycles sporting small national flags; motor vehicles draped in large national flags. How must one understand this collective euphoria?

A Celebration of Relief

Late Wednesday evening I was getting ready to retire for the night and remembered I had an appointment in Colombo. There was a reflex tightening of my chest and a feeling of anxiety. This was a recurring phenomenon whenever I had to go out driving through crowded streets. [Tamil friends have told me of similar reflex fears of a Sinhala



Sri Lankans wave their national flag as they celebrate the military victory over Tamil Tiger rebels in Colombo.

backlash, triggered by memories of July 1983, whenever there was a savage LTTE attack on unarmoured Sinhalese). There had been terrorist attacks on all the routes I take to Colombo. I escaped death when the Central Bank was attacked in 1990. I was at that time here to research for my PH.D. A relative who has a state of the art audio/visual studio was at the time a supporter of President Kumaratunga. He wished to make a video documentary at his own expense about the G.L.Neelan 'package' for educational purposes. He asked me to help with the script and direct the filming. I readily agreed. He had made an appointment with the secretary of then Constitutional Affairs Minister Prof. G.L. Pieris, to collect infor-

mation about the proposal. His office was in the Presidential Secretariate complex. My relative had planned to leave his car park at the Intercontinental car park as was his custom when he had something to do in the Fort. The secretary had told him it would be more convenient to use the car park of the Hilton Hotel adjoining the secretariate grounds. We walked the short distance up to the building, walked into the office and as we sat down the entire building shook with thunderous explosions. Dust fell from the ceiling. Air conditioners came crashing down. One missed the secretary's head by a hair's breadth. Looking out we saw the Central Bank building in flames and thick black fumes billowing from

the roof of the Ceylinco building. Dust, debris, blood, carnage and death. If we had gone round to park at the Intercontinental we might almost certainly have been caught in the blast. As my relative and I drove away from the Fort, we both burst into nervous laughter. "Bloody funny no? Going to make a film about peace and getting killed by the LTTE?" The laughter cleared the tension. Since then that incident there has been this subconscious anxiety. Hence, the automatic tightening of the chest, the anxiety. Since I come for short periods and return to the Netherlands the shock of that experience may have been lodged in my unconsciousness more strongly than my compatriots who have to travel daily to work and send or take

their children to school. But last Wednesday night a voice within me said. "It's Okay, It's over". It's over." Suddenly it became clear to me - the celebrations of the people, the jubilation, the crackers and the kiribath. For nearly twenty six years our people, Sinhalese Tamil, Muslim or Burger (a terrorist's bomb does not inquire about ethnicity), have been steeling themselves and going about their business, day in day out. They had to earn a livelihood to look after their families. Humankind cannot bear too much reality so the fears and anxieties had been repressed and driven to the unconscious. Life must go on even if sudden death is a not so clear but an ever present danger. Now with the news that the scourge of LTTE terrorism had been destroyed, repressed fears and anxieties burst through the threshold of the unconscious and found cathartic release, found expression in exuberant jubilation. That is why the celebrations not directed at anyone because it was an inner demon that was being exorcised. People have endured these anxieties for far too many years, especially those who were compelled because of their modest or meagre incomes to use public transport. For most people the comforting thought is 'Ivarai' - It's over.

Triumphalism ?

The Island columnist Shanie (23/05/09) deplored last week's celebrations as an exhibition of Sinhalese triumphalism. There is a belief that Shanie is a 'She' and on this assumption I will use the third person feminine. Her article was titled 'The Search For Peace Must Begin at Least Now' - At least Now? She self deprecatingly calls herself a 'Nobody'.

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but surely this nobody who writes a regular column to this paper, must believe she is a 'Somebody' that must be taken seriously. So much for modesty! Several opinions expressed in last Saturday's article cannot be left unchallenged. In the first place, there is the characterisation of the celebrations as 'triumphalism'. Shanie must be careful about using terminology too loosely to suit her attributions. "Triumphalism is the attitude or belief that a particular doctrine, religion, culture, or social system is superior to and should triumph over all others" (Wikipedia). Now unless Shanie and Tamil nationalists like the 'concerned group' that made an appeal to the government to stop the war, are either ignorant of, or they consciously ignore what the majority of the Sinhalese everywhere and Muslims in the Northern (now cleansed) and the Eastern province have felt during the last twenty years, the use of the word 'triumphalism' with all its pejorative connotations is mischievous.

We must not forget the conscious and deliberate massacres of innocent Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims to break their spirits and make them beg their government(s) to accede to the LTTE's demands - for the sake of peace. The Sinhalese Buddhists were ruthlessly killed simply because they are Sinhalese Buddhists. They were the principal target of the race war that Prabhakaran waged against what he called the "Sinhala desam", in all his Heroes Day speeches. The Muslims in the North and the East were an obstacle to the LTTE project of making themselves the "Sole Representative of all Tamil Speaking People" on this island. But as the very term Muslim implies the identity and solidarity of Muslims the world over is their religion. Muslims speak different languages in different countries. In Prabhakaran's Eelam, Muslims must yield to the demand that they are Tamil Speaking first and Islamic second or face expurgation. The entire Eelam Nation comes unstuck if it is not based on a linguistic or philological nationalism. That is why Tamil Nationalists down play cultural nationalism. Culturally the majority of Tamils are Hindus and they are closer to Sinhalese Buddhists than Christian or Muslim Tamils. They worship the same gods, and celebrate the same New Year. They even share the same negative features like a similar caste structure. Nothing terrifies the vanguard Tamil Christian nationalists more than the development of Hindu-Buddhist solidarity.

What have the poor and destitute people of Kebithgollewa, Buttala or poor people in bus to a village outside Piliyandala town done to deserve such savage punishment? The villagers of Kebithgollewa (close to a hundred packed into one bus) were traveling with their children to a maternity clinic at Anuradhapura hospital when the bus was Claymore bombed. Is it only tribalist Sinhalese whose hearts melted at the rows of little coffins and the mass bur-

ial? A bus in Buttala was Claymore bombed and when panic stricken survivors were running out of the bus they were shot down by LTTE gunmen hiding in the bush. Why did those 'humane' NGOs not organize protests against these atrocities? These are but recent atrocities but has one forgotten Kattankudy and Arantalawa? And the more than six hundred policeman gunned down in cold blood before their blood was drawn for LTTE blood banks? Collective punishment was meted out on the poorest of the poor Sinhalese in remote areas. People were abandoning their villages and their fields, in threatened villages (in NGO jargon, "border villages"), because they felt there was no one but "gam battas" to protect them. Ms. Shanie, there was no triumphalism because the term implies a belief in inevitable and final victory. The majority of the Sinhalese felt they were a beaten people because of the atrocities committed with impunity by the Tigers, while the honourable men and women of peace and the so-called 'international communi-



ty' asked "both parties" to end the violence and to negotiate a settlement, even though it was one party that was doing the killing during the bogus CFA. In addition, efforts were made to break the spirit of an unsuspecting people by those 'peace' NGOs who fanned out into the Sinhala countryside - places like Galewala and Amapara - to tell them that "the war was unwinnable", that a settlement had to be made with the LTTE - the "sole representatives of the Tamil people". And these are the very people who were silent about pluralism and democracy and respect for human rights in LTTE's Eelam. While condemning Sinhala majoritarianism they have little problem promoting Tamil majoritarianism in a territory consisting of a merged Northern and Eastern province. We know how the LTTE treated their minorities. The peace NGOs had no problem handing over hapless Tamil people to a bunch of fascist thugs. No scruples then about the plight of Tamil civilians, then.

The majority of the Sinhalese people were broken and dispirited. Every time a terrorist attack killed a mother, father, son or daughter husband or wife, the Sinhalese people did not go on a rampage attacking Tamils. They grieved in private, despaired and kept asking, "Meke kavada ivara veydhe - when will this ever end?" Who the hell cared? It is these once battered and broken people that celebrated with "street dancing, lighting of fire crackers, vehicle processions, etc" - Shanie (23/05/09). But, what was declared an impossibility happened. As the Indian Major Gen. Mehta, told the LA Times about the SL armed forces, "They did everything a general dreams of ... A military precept the world over is that you can't win militarily against an insurgency, which is essentially a political struggle. They turned that on its head." (to be continued).