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LTTE is immune to international pressure

Manjula Fernando

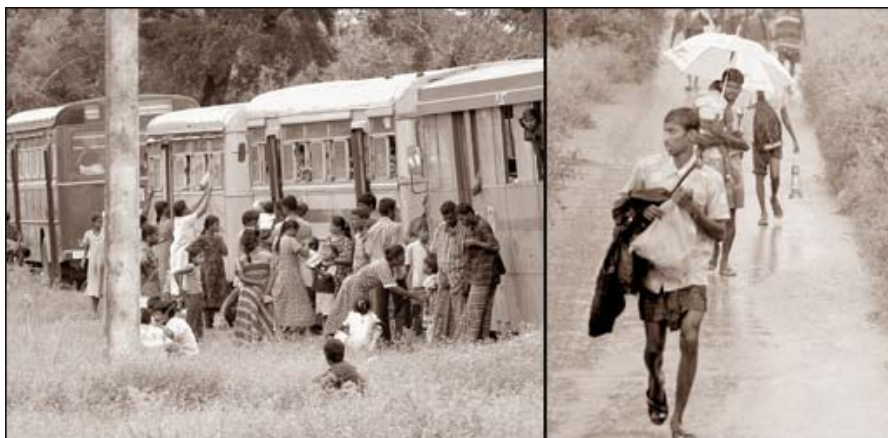
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Most issues that bother or worry Tamils 30 years ago have now become irrelevant. Security, law and order have become the main issues. The people of North are ready for a political change. If you go near a Jaffna person, he will tell you they don't want the LTTE anywhere near them.

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A team of Tamil Diaspora, professionals from all walks of life, from nine countries including Canada, Australia, UK, Denmark, Switzerland, France and Germany were in Sri Lanka on a fact finding mission last week.

The visit took place on the initiative of the Australia based Tamils. They visited IDP camps in Vavunia as well as the



IDPs reaching the camps with the hope to return home soon. Pictures by Rukmal Gamage

Ambepussa rehabilitation centre for ex-LTTE cadres. They also met Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa MP in Colombo and expressed their concerns over the trapped civilians. Here is an interview with some members of this delegation.

Q: What was your mission here?

The mission was to see the real situation both on the ground and in the context of what the Government was doing.

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We visited the Ambepussa rehabilitation camp for young LTTE cadres who have been taken into custody and who have surrendered. We also visited the Transit Camp at Gamini Vidyalaya, Vavuniya where IPDs are received and the Lakshman Kadirgamar Camp.

Q: What do you think of the way these civilians are being treated in camps?

I think they are treated in the best possible way. Always you could find fault. I have been in an IDP camp in 1977 and I know what it is like. I think they are doing the best they can.

Q: Do you think you can do something to save the civilians trapped by the LTTE?

That is the reason why we are here.

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To find if we can do something to get them out. First of all, our request to the LTTE is to let the civilians go and the Government must provide all humanitarian needs and security to the people who are coming out.

Q: What is your opinion about halting the ongoing operations to wipe out terrorism or going for a temporary ceasefire at this point?

We are not in a position to ask the Government to stop the war at this stage.

That's not our role and that's not our position. The Government has to do it according to its objectives.

However, what we feel is, as a responsible Government, apparently on the winning streak now, it should be prepared to take the risk, whatever necessary to allow the civilians to escape.

But this doesn't mean we are asking them to stop the war.

That's their judgement. Make arrangements, even at the risk of the LTTE doing something tricky, give a chance for these civilians to come out.

Q: Do you endorse the LTTE's claim that they are the sole representatives of the Tamils?

Not at all. There is no justification for them to make that claim. Because they have established their position by force. Of course, there has been support. But it had been backed by force and violence.

Q: How do you rate the support of the Tamil Diaspora towards the LTTE? Is it diminishing?

I would say 40 percent is committed. It is very difficult to convince these people until the problem is over and there is another 40 percent that is in the middle who can shift positions depending on the circumstances. The rest, 20 percent is clearly opposing.

Even the people who oppose the LTTE joined the protests in London and Canada. They marched on streets demanding freedom to Tamil people. They all are not LTTE supporters.

The negative media coverage by the LTTE makes the people more emotional and they don't understand the real situation. Therefore, the Diaspora still thinks the Sri Lankan Government is putting them in barbed wire IDP camps and treating them very badly. That's one of the reasons why we came to see what is exactly happening in IDP camps.

In the camps, we have seen that the accusations the LTTE has made through the media is not 'true'. What those people at the camps told us was the truth.

The entire Diaspora is sympathetic towards these civilians' plight. That cannot be interpreted as support for the LTTE.



T. Yoganathan Putra, Media Information Expert from Germany- He was held captive by the LTTE when he returned to Sri Lanka for his wedding in 1991. He had to pay a Rs.3.5 million ransom for his release.



Dr. Rajasingham Narendran-Veterinay expert, former Professor at Peradeniya University, now in Saudi Arabia. His family lives in Colombo.

Q: Has the LTTE's fund raising suffered due to their military defeats?

No. They are masters at that. They know how to do it and they are much better at canvassing and propaganda mobilizing than the Government.

They are campaigning (in foreign countries) saying that the Tamil people are treated badly but the ambassadors and the external officials know the truth. We met them in Colombo.

But one thing that is favourable to the LTTE and probably confusing the foreign embassies here is that the media is nowhere close to the war zone. There is no independent reporting. It can play both ways.



Rajeshwari Balasubramaniam- an activist, a journalist from London.

Media can distort and sensationalize the real situation. But at the moment, the lack of media coverage has created confusion. The embassies do not see the truth. Small issues have been portrayed as big, there is no clear reporting on this. Media should play a responsible role in bringing out the real situation in the war zone and not damage the country's image.

Q: But there is a belief that the Government's counter terrorism propaganda is doing well against the LTTE.

We saw presentations, specially those on Eastern development and what they have done with the IDPs. I don't think they have marketed this well. This would have gone a long way if they have done the marketing properly in winning over the Diaspora.

The issues that are at stake in implementing the 13th Amendment have not been properly debated in the Sinhala and Tamil media.

Media has absolutely failed in this regard, educating the masses on what the 13th Amendment is. Hence, the extremists enjoy a free run in misleading the masses. Most issues that bother or worry Tamils 30 years ago have now become irrelevant. Security and law and order have become the main issues.

Q: What should be done?

We must unite and re-structure our country.

There should not be any riots in this country in future. But at the same time, if anyone says if you don't like here, go back to India, that is totally insulting. We may be a minority but we are very much part of this country.

The IDPs that we met in the camps are the poorest of the poor. They have no voice. The people who could raise a voice have gone in exile and they are portraying our country in a negative picture.

Q: Do you have faith in the Government's APRC process to find a political solution to the North and East issue?

Intentions are there. I am sure those are good. Prof. Vitarana is doing his best to get something through. But we all realise the present Constitution has its stand. As J. R. Jayewardene planned, it has left very little room for any amendments and correction. I don't think there is a political will among the Sinhalese majority to go through the process they did in 1972 or 1977. That's why we are saying let's start with the 13th Amendment and implement it honestly.

We can get a lot out of that process. Devolution of power must be on an equal footage. Regardless of the JVP, JHU or UNP, they must support to bring peace to this country. You may have political and policy differences but you must support the Government.

Q: The Government says that the operations to liberate civilians and regain the LTTE land will be over soon. What role do you plan to play in the post-conflict North?

We want to be the bridge.

Q: Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe said the LTTE may not listen to the international community but the voice of Tamil diaspora would be an effective force to save the trapped civilians.

Holmes had met with the LTTE's K. Pathmanathan, arranged by the help of the Norwegian Government and he has clearly said the LTTE will not let the civilians go. I think the LTTE is immune to international pressure.

Americans have pressurized. India and Norway are probably pressurizing them. It is obvious the LTTE is keeping the civilians for their safety. Under these circumstances, no one can convince them, unless they decide to let them go. Because they know once the civilian shield is gone, they are finished. So it's a do or die situation for them.

Q: Can't the Diaspora do something?

No, except, we can make our appeal but the final call is with the LTTE. I don't think they are open to moral pressure anymore.

Q: Is Prabhakaran still hailed as a hero among the Diaspora?

To some, he is a divine figure, as someone who had come to save Tamils. According to Hindu belief, there are Avathara pursusha, someone born to defend and save them. This image has come in and it will be very difficult to get rid of it. I think with time and with the truth coming to light now I think that will change.

Q: Did you visit the East as well?

No. We had a very tight schedule. We wanted to go but it could not be accommodated. But we were impressed definitely with what they showed us in the presentations on the East. It was apparent that they have done a lot. The only disappointment is that it had been a central Government endeavour not a provincial one.

The election process in the East was more cosmetic to please the international community. It is alright to appoint an Interim Council but elections should be held when the conditions are right, when violence has completely gone from the scene.

Under the Indo-Lanka Peace Agreement, there were provisions for Interim Council. Do it now, with decent people from the North. In Jaffna, there is leadership that is emerging, former GA of Jaffna Lionel Fernando should be made the head of this Interim Council. With two other members, a Tamil and a Muslim and run it for two to three years before conducting elections.

Q: Do you think the people of North are ready for a political change as they have been under the grip of the LTTE for so many years?

A political change yes. If you go near a Jaffna person, they will tell you they don't want the LTTE anywhere near them.

But conditions were not there for a political process to resume because a lot of them had been displaced, quite number live in Colombo and towns around here. They should go back to their homes. IDPs have to go back. They should not have to live in fear of the LTTE or other group.

The majority of the Diaspora is supporting the LTTE and other fractions because they have no other democratic alternative. The Government must change this.

Q: What is your message to the TNA?

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