

Sri Lanka - camps, media... genocide?



Martin Shaw

What kind of violence has the Sri Lankan state been committing against its Tamil civilian population as the island's civil war ended; on what scale and with what intentions? **Martin Shaw**, a historical sociologist of war and global politics, explores the difficult terrain where war, atrocity and genocide meet.

The civil war in Sri Lanka is receding from the international headlines, as crises in Iran and celebrity deaths occupy the media's limited space and attention-span. A very large number of its Tamil victims are still, more than six weeks after the fighting ended, confined by government forces in a complex of forty camps in the north east of the country. An estimated 280,000 civilians - originally displaced from their homes by the fighting between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (Tamil Tigers / LTTE), and in some cases fleeing from the brutal regime in the LTTE's former "liberated" zone - are being held, generally against their will.

"The trouble with guns: Sri Lanka, South Africa, Ireland" (10 June 2009) President Mahinda Rajapaksa, in his "victory speech", told Sri Lanka's parliament that "our heroic forces have sacrificed their lives to protect Tamil civilians", and he took "personal responsibility" for protecting Tamils. Yet his government is now scandalously confining this huge population - who have already suffered not only from the LTTE but from Sri

Lankan bombardments which caused probably tens of thousands of deaths and injuries - in squalid conditions. The government has officially backtracked, under international pressure, on plans to hold the displaced, while screening them for potential "terrorists", for up to three years; it now says that 80% will be resettled by the end of 2009.

In the shadows

The eruption in Iran has in a twisted way done the Sri Lankan government a service. In any case, Colombo has been ruthless in restricting international journalists and rights organisations: in May 2009 even the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was barred from Menik Farm, the largest camp, and Channel 4's Nick Paton Walsh was deported. Sinhala nationalism remains oppressively dominant within the majority population, and critics of the government face an atmosphere of intimidation and even terror: Sri Lankan journalists have frequently been murdered, assaulted and detained.

Although human-rights organisations and western governments have continued to protest at the situation, the Sri Lankan government has found friends in the United Nations's new Human Rights Council; it was able to pass a resolution there on 27 May 2009 praising its own commitment to human rights (endorsed by such notable bastions of freedom as China, Cuba, Russia, Pakistan and Egypt). The vigorous campaigns by members of the Tamil diasporas have ensured that the situation has not been entirely forgotten, but the interned Tamils don't have the mobile-phone access that (in the early post-election stages at least) so embarrassed the Iranian regime. There are some pictures of the camps on the internet, but no iconic images of Tamil suffering have entered the commercial, established media in the manner of Iran's Neda Sultan - or indeed of Fikret Alic, the emaciated prisoner pictured behind barbed-wire in the Trnopolje camp in Bosnia in summer 1992.

Adire predicament

It is often said that pictures tell their own story. However what is impor-

tant is the media *narrative* and the *momentum* behind the issue: in both the Iranian and Bosnian cases the crises were much more strongly established in the dominant media (and the exposure of the experiences of Neda Sultan and Fikret Alic) fed this. In the case of Sri Lanka, sadly, the level and intensity of coverage - despite the impressive Tamil campaigns - has not matched these.

Moreover, what was important in Bosnia was that Trnopolje was described as a "concentration" camp - so the image facilitated the connection between the atrocious treatment of Bosnian Muslim prisoners and the murderous history of concentration camps in Europe under Nazism. The Bosnian-Serbian government that was responsible for Trnopolje naturally disputed this appellation, describing it merely as a holding centre for "refugees"; today the lowest-common-denominator descriptor seems to be a "detention" camp.

The Sri Lankan government also prefers its camps to be seen as "refugee" camps. However once people are detained, camps are clearly more than that; and where there is a sustained policy of concentrating detainees then the term "concentration camp" applies. In war, these camps - invented at the beginning of the 20th century to describe the enclosures in which the Spanish detained Cubans and the British detained Boerfarmers and their families during the South African wars - are usually designed to corral a civilian population seen as potentially sympathetic to a guerrilla enemy (as Tamils evidently are still seen despite the LTTE's defeat).

Totalitarian regimes, including Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, have also used camps to concentrate other civilian groups - actual and potential political opponents, trade unionists, and ethnic "enemies" such as Jews. The complication in using the "concentration camp" category is that such regimes went on to develop their camps into something more - in the Soviet case, labour camps, in the Nazi case, extermination camps. Clearly, not all concentration camps are "death" camps in the Nazi sense; but all concentration camps tend to produce death, as well as widespread physical and mental harm. Since

their premise is enmity towards the interned civilians, the history of concentration-camps has been marked, from the Boerwar onwards, by callous disregard for their welfare, and often worse.

As Human Rights Watch remarked of the Sri Lankan situation on 11 June 2009:

"Virtually all camps are overcrowded, some holding twice the number recommended by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Food distribution is chaotic, there are shortages of water, and sanitation facilities are inadequate. Camp residents do not have access to proper medical services and communicable diseases have broken out in the camps."

What is more, "the military camp administration has imposed numerous restrictions on humanitarian organizations working in the camps, such as limiting the number of vehicles and staff members that can enter the camps, which has delayed the provision of much-needed aid. The military does not allow organizations into the camps to conduct protection activities, and a ban on talking to the camp residents leaves them further isolated."

If reports of violence and disappearances are added to this, the situation of the interned Tamils appears dire.

A "rolling" genocide?

The western fixation with the Nazi holocaust means that there is an obvious political temptation to link all anti-civilian violence with the Nazi model. The pro-Tamil United States-based academic Francis Boyle, in his posts, sees a sixty-year "rolling" genocide in which Sinhalese governments of Ceylon (the country's name at independence in 1948) and Sri Lanka have sought "to annihilate the Tamils and to steal their lands and natural resources. This is what Hitler and the Nazis called *lebensraum* - "living space" for the Sinhala at the expense of the Tamils." In this perspective, the camp system is all too clearly the latest stage of genocide - although other Tamil advocates date genocide back to the anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 in response to which the LTTE campaign began.

The idea of "rolling" genocide, first developed (I think) by Madeleine Albright to distinguish the Sudanese campaign in Darfur from the "volcanic" genocide in Rwanda, suggests

discontinuity in a history of genocide - albeit, in the Darfur case, within two or three years rather than six decades. However in many cases, there may be genocidal "moments" (as the genocide historian, Dirk Moses, has suggested of colonialism) in stories of oppression - decades or even centuries long - which do not, taken as a whole, constitute processes of genocide (see A Dirk Moses ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* [Berghahn, 2008]).

There may be sporadic genocidal massacres, rapes and expulsions, or even sustained campaigns, at particular points in these histories. Something like this seems to be true in the Sri Lankan case: no one doubts the long history of Sinhalese nationalist oppression against the Tamil community since independence, which includes moments like 1983 which can be plausibly seen as genocidal outbursts. But the history as a whole is not simply one of genocide.

Indeed the dedication of the LTTE to armed struggle against the Sri Lankan state helped turn a history of oppression and resistance into one of brutal insurgency and counterinsurgency (see *The trouble with guns: Sri Lanka, South Africa, Ireland*", 10 June 2009). We know however that counterinsurgency is one of the most common contexts of genocidal violence. It remains to be seen - since most of the survivors are locked away from the world's media and the Sri Lankan government is blocking all attempts at independent investigation of the recent violence - how far the Sri Lankan army went in the direction of deliberate atrocity as opposed to brutal disregard for civilians. Here, indiscriminate allegations of a long-running Sri Lankan genocide paradoxically blunt the real questions: what *kind* of violence did the Sri Lankan state commit against its Tamil civilian population, on what scale and with what intentions?

The continuing concentration of over 250,000 people in the camps both blocks the search for answers to these questions, and itself constitutes a most serious crime. If the doors are not opened quickly, this will raise questions of whether the government seriously intends a restoration of Tamil society in the conquered zone. This would indeed pose a question of genocide, in the sense of the deliberate destruction of a population group in its home territory.

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