

# EELAM

## THE TAMIL NATION FIGHTS FOR SURVIVAL



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## EELAM - THE TAMIL NATION FIGHTS FOR SURVIVAL

Since Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) achieved its independence in 1948 the Tamil-speaking people in the Island have had to constantly wage struggles in various forms to defend their fundamental rights, which have all been systematically violated by successive governments. Indeed, the present Sri Lankan regime is dictatorial in nature and is taking active steps towards the actual genocide of the Tamil people. This exhibition of photographs and illustrations highlights the current conflict in the Island and provides a brief historical introduction to the problem.

## A Tale of Two Nations

The population of the Island known today as Sri Lanka is mainly comprised of two Nations - those who speak Tamil as their language and those who speak Sinhala. A recent archaeological survey conducted in various parts of Sri Lanka by Scholars from various countries, including the United States and Britain, actually tends to suggest that the cultural remains of the roots of Tamil civilisation in the Island predate the arrival of the ancestors of the Sinhalese people. It is therefore not surprising that the Sri Lankan government halted this scholarly investigation. But what cannot be seriously disputed is that the two national groups have both lived in the Island for generations and centuries, and both have an equal right to build their lives and homes there.

The first European colonialists to reach the Island were the Portugese who came in the 16th century. At that time they found three separate and independent Kingdoms in the Island. One was a Tamil Kingdom in the north and east whose capital was Jaffna. The other two kingdoms were Sinhalese and were located in the centre and south of the Island with their capitals at Kandy & Kotte respectively.

The last European colonialists were the British and it

was only in the period of their rule that the Island was brought under a single administration and jurisdiction. When British colonial rule came to an end they left Ceylon as a unitary state with only ineffective and inadequate safeguards for the rights of minorities, who were principally the Tamil-speaking people.

After independence every demand by the Tamil-speaking people for their democratic rights has been met by an intensification of systematic and institutionalised discrimination and repeated riots and racist pogroms which have been instigated, tolerated and indeed encouraged by the Sinhala ruling elite. The most serious outbreaks of race riots in the Island took place in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1979, 1981 and 1983 - these have resulted in thousands of deaths and thousands more injuries and people forced to become refugees as well as the extensive loss of property.

In the face of this continual wave of attacks the old guard Tamil leadership, which did not represent the interests of the mass of Tamil working people but only a privileged elite, and who therefore had to collaborate with the ruling circles in order to preserve their own power and interests. And the Island's two main left wing parties, which had hitherto championed the rights of the Tamil people, agreed to accept Sinhala as the only official language in exchange for cheap electoral gains achieved by forming a united front with one of the two main Sinhala chauvinist parties.

## LAND OF OPPRESSION

Another particularity of the Island's situation was that the local labour force was unwilling to work in the plantations established by the British to cultivate tea and, to a lesser extent, rubber. To rectify this problem, the British brought indentured Tamil labourers from the south of India to work on the plantation from the 1850s onwards. As with similar British colonial schemes in Guyana and Malaya, the introduction of indentured plantation labour both created a labour force whose conditions and life was akin to slavery as well as helping the long standing British imperialist strategy of 'divide and rule'.

During the period of World War II the left movement in the Island gathered strength, particularly amongst the plantation workers. This, combined with the successes of socialist revolutions elsewhere in Asia, led the local ruling class to worry for their future, particularly as universal suffrage had been introduced in the 1930s.

Therefore, after independence the first act of the new government was to deprive at one stroke the one million Tamil plantation workers of their citizenship and their right to vote. Overnight they became stateless people in their own country, in much the same way as millions of black people in South Africa.

To keep itself in power the Sri Lankan ruling class fuelled the monster of Sinhala chauvinism to guarantee itself a base of support. But in doing so they created such a powerful movement that they were unable to offer any meaningful concessions to the Tamil ruling elite. Whilst many pacts were entered into, they were all either not implemented, broken or unilaterally abrogated by the Sinhala ruling class.

Therefore, over a period of time, Sinhala was made the only official language and Buddhism (which is not practised by the Tamil people) became the only state religion.

In the fields of education and employment systematic and institutionalised discrimination was developed. Sinhala settlers - many of them anti-social elements were sent to colonise Tamil lands. This forms part of an attempt to change the demographic pattern of the Tamil homeland and break the continuity of Eelam - as the Tamil people call their nation - by dividing the north and east. To implement this scheme the Sri Lankan Army has repeatedly evicted families at gunpoint from lands where they had lived for generations.

Institutionalised discrimination against Tamil students was enacted in 1971 when a law was passed stating that Tamils needed to score higher marks than Sinhalese if they were to gain admittance to university.

# THE RISE OF THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

This fundamental attack on basic human rights led to the development of a militant student movement and the demand was increasingly put for the creation of a Tamil Nation where the people could obtain their basic democratic rights. Over the years all forms of peaceful protest had been met with a brutal and violent response. Therefore, with the people subjected to state terrorism and the systematic destruction of their economy and livelihood, the people came to see the road of armed struggle as their only hope of salvation and armed resistance groups began to emerge.

Today there are five major liberation organisations - the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), and the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOT). With the exception of PLOT the various groups have together formed a united front, the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF).

Although forced to wage the armed struggle, the various groups have also expressed their wish to find a political solution to the problem. Accordingly talks were held last year in Thimpu, the capital of the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan.

As a result of bitter past experience, the entire Tamil delegation, consisting of the five liberation movements and the reformist Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) put forward four principles which they demanded the Sri Lankan government accept.

## These were:

- 1) Tamil Speaking people constitute a Nation
- 2) The right to self - determination:
- 3) Recognition of a Homeland
- 4) Citizenship rights for all Tamils:

These demands were not accepted by the Sri Lankan government, which has subsequently stated that the problem is a military one demanding a military solution.

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## THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

As part of its attempts to find a military solution the Sri Lankan government has been integrating the Island more and more closely into the imperialist world framework. In particular the regime has been obtaining arms, ammunition, military expertise and financial assistance from a host of imperialist and reactionary regimes, including those of South Africa, Israel, Britain, the United States and Pakistan, who share a common interest in destabilising the Indian Ocean region.

The United States, in particular, is casting covetous eyes on the Island and is bitterly opposed to any progressive or revolutionary movement developing there. It is an open secret that it wants to establish a base at the port of Trincomalee, which is in Eelam, for its Seventh Fleet. This acquires added urgency in view of the revolutionary upsurge in the Philippines. If the United States loses its bases in that country - in particular the massive Clark Air Force Base and Subic Naval Base - it will urgently need to find replacements, a task that is becoming more and more difficult.

The greater the degree of imperialist collaboration with the Sri Lankan government, the greater has been the

development of its own dictatorial features. Since President J.R. Jayewardene came to power in 1977 he has failed to call an election under one pretext or another. Since the main opposition party - the Tamil United Liberation Front - was forced to withdraw from parliament there has been no effective opposition in that body. And Jayewardene unilaterally changed the constitution of the country so that the Prime Ministerial system has been replaced by an Executive Presidency, in much the same way as General Zia-ul-Haq has done in Pakistan.

There is extensive press censorship in Sri Lanka today. Under the Prevention of Terrorism act (PTA) people can be detained without charge or trial for 18 months. Some have been unilaterally held for even longer than this, which prompted a hunger strike last year. The PTA has been used extensively against the Tamil people, and more recently against Sinhala progressives as well. Deaths in police custody or at the hands of the army do not have to be reported or investigated.

## THE BRITISH CONNECTION

The so-called democracies of the West say that Sri Lanka is a democracy which has an internal problem with

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which they do not wish to interfere. Britain is particularly vocal in this regard. Yet at the same time they provide the Sri Lankan regime with all-round military, political and economic support.

Sri Lanka is one of the highest recipients of British aid. During her 1984 visit to the Island, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher openly stated in a speech that the level of British aid was high because her government and that of Jayewardene shared the same economic and political philosophy.

Britain trains the Sri Lankan officer corps at Sandhurst and has supplied military equipment including helicopters and patrol boats. At the same time racist restrictions have been brought in to prevent Tamil refugees from finding safety in Britain.

Former members of the Special Air Services (SAS) which is notorious for its brutal counter-insurgency warfare against national liberation movements are operating with the Sri Lankan armed forces. They are recruited through the Channel Islands firm of KMS Ltd. The British government says that this is a private company over which it has no control. Yet this same company provides security personnel for the regime in Oman, which is still a virtual British colony, as well as providing official Security for British personnel in Beirut.

## WE CHARGE GENOCIDE

The act of genocide involves the physical cultural liquidation of a people. Such is indeed the fate that hangs over the Tamil speaking people today.

Temples, Churches, Libraries and Schools have over the years been systematically destroyed. In 1981 police commandos burnt the main library of Jaffna, destroying some 100,000 books. Many of the volumes were irreplaceable and together they constituted a unique and priceless part of the cultural heritage of the Nation of Eelam. Out of a population of just 3.5 million, more than 200,000 have already been made refugees. 150,000 of them have had to live in refugee camps in India, which obviously finds it difficult to deal with such a large refugee problem.

Large scale massacres - many now as a result of aerial bombing raids - are reported from villages both in the coastal areas and inland, as well as in the towns and cities. Very often innocent people - particularly young men - are massacred and then described as "terrorists" as the regime labels the armed freedom fighters. Prohibited zones can be declared at will. These are nothing less than a licence to kill as all human activity is made illegal in these zones. Prohibited zones have also been declared at sea. These are depriving thousands of fishermen of their livelihoods and they are now literally facing starvation as their only means of livelihood has been taken away.

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In the face of these genocidal attacks is it any wonder that the Tamil people feel that they have been left with no alternative but to struggle for their freedom by any means necessary?

## YOU CAN HELP

There are many ways in which people in Britain can assist the Tamil nation's fight for survival.

At the moment it is particularly important to put pressure on the British government to immediately halt its military collaboration with the Sri Lankan regime and to suspend other areas of aid until such time as a democratic solution is found to the national problems of the Island. We call on people to raise this matter with their Members of Parliament and in any organisation or trade union branch that they are members of.

Help is also urgently needed on a humanitarian basis for the refugees in India, Britain and elsewhere.

For further information on the struggle of the Tamil people and what you can do to help, we ask you to contact the address below:

**General Union of Eelam Students (GUES)**  
**B.M. Box 2860, London WC1V 6XX**

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