



North East Secretariat On Human Rights
NESOHR

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Revisiting July 1983: A Re-enactment in the Making

The NorthEast Secretariat on Human Rights (NESOHR) notes with grave concern, the accelerating pace of state military violence against the Tamil people living in the military occupied parts of the Tamil homeland. Killings, abductions, mass arrests after midnight round ups and detention based on hooded individuals' 'nod' and disappearance thereafter have become commonplace today. It is no secret that these hooded men are the hirelings from the para-militaries and armed groups working with the state military. Our concern as a human rights body of the Tamil people gets aggravated by the unprecedented level of collective Tamil remembrance of the horrific Black July of 1983, this time round. This is in contrast to the initial period of the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) when the Tamil people believed that the time has come to forget the bitter past and re-start their life with a new impetus. The CFA did provide to the Tamil people the ground to build hope. Hopes dashed to the ground with a government that has been dragging its feet for four and a half years without implementing the CFA and allowing its military to go on the rampage again, the Tamil people are seeing the making of another Black July. Implementation of the CFA is the key to deliver the basic peace dividend to a people who lost 80,000 of their brethren in the two decades of a horrendous war. The very same people are now forced to live under the boots of the very same military and are therefore understandably fearful of a re-enactment of the holocaust of 1983 and many times before.

Conscious of the reality that almost every nation state in the world did have civil wars, racial oppression, despotic and tyrannical rulers who oppressed people who asked for justice and equality, we are also familiar with the transformations that have taken place in those parts of the world. Bitter past was erased from the minds of those oppressed by the righteous actions of men of wisdom in statecraft who learnt from the mistakes. Not so with Sri Lanka. It is appropriate here to quote from the introductory pages of "Emergency 58" written and published by the eminent journalist of the time Mr. Tarzie Vittachi. His words penned in 1959 on the first communal assault on the Tamil people in the year 1958 are prophetic. It is worth perusing over Tarzie Vittachi's reference to one of Mahathma Gandhi's statements on communal strife in India:

"No cabinet worthy of being representative of a large mankind can afford to take any step merely because it is likely to win the hasty applause of an unthinking public. In the midst of insanity, should not our best representatives retain sanity and bravely prevent a wreck of the ship of state under their care ?

Vittachi's comparison of the Indian context of course is obviously to the cowardice and lack of political wisdom and courage the then Prime Minister of Ceylon Mr.S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike exhibited during a state of national crisis. Tamil people who demonstrated their protest against the discriminatory Sinhala ONLY language law were beaten up, killed in hundreds, their properties destroyed or looted and the survivors sent in government arranged ships to the Tamil districts to which they originally belonged, saying ironically that there lies your homeland. Tarzie says:

“Emergency 58 ends with a question: ‘Have we come to the parting of the ways?’ Many thoughtful people believe that we have. Others, more hopeful, feel that the bloodbath we have emerged from has purified the national spirit and given people a costly lesson in humility.”

Civilized parts of today's world had many Vittachis and hence the lessons learnt on good governance accompanied with equality, dignity and justice to all citizens irrespective of race or religion. Ceylon and later Sri Lanka miserably failed to learn from past mistakes but studiously believed in nurturing racial hatred, for that is a handy instrument in the search for political power in the local context. This is amply demonstrated in the communal pogroms that ensued many times later under the stewardship of successive governments. The cumulative effect of this addiction to state and state-aided violence, paying scant respect to human rights and ironically the welfare of the nation was the staging of Black July 1983.

The Tamil people believed, as Tarzie Vittachi says, that the bloodbath of 1958 has purified the national spirit. They believed it over and over again after every assault on them till 1983. But it was different in 1983: 52 Tamil political prisoners in the state prison in Welikada were brutally killed in the most inhuman manner by Sinhala hard core criminal prison inmates aided and abetted by the guards. Innocent unarmed civilians were butchered, thrown alive into hot tar barrels, Tamils pulled out from their residences with the help of voters lists provided by government ministers who masterminded the pogrom to make it appear as mob violence.

The international community and the civilized world at large would do well to do some soul searching vis-à-vis the human rights record of successive governments of Ceylon and Sri Lanka to ascertain whether any of these perpetrators of crimes against humanity have been indicted locally or in the International Court of Justice. Commencing 1958, running through 1961, 1968, 1977 and finally 1983 that uprooted a million Tamils to flee their homeland for safety, the Tamil people have been given a clear message: “Do not ask for anything, be satisfied with what we give and keep shut”. When it comes to negotiations, one has to look into the pages of history that has on record the various pacts that were abrogated just because some extremist elements in the south opposed granting of any rights to the Tamil people. On a human rights perspective, successive governments of this island need to be indicted for crimes against humanity, the Tamil people in this instance. The innumerable disappearances, inhuman displacements caused by military offensives, mass murders, aerial bombardments and the mass graves all of which make Black July 1983 just one of the HR violations and not the only tragedy the Tamil people remember every year.