

University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Sri Lanka

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Ketheeswaran Loganathan and the Tamil Dissidents' Dilemma

Ketheeswaran's assassination fell on the first anniversary of Lakshman Kadirgamar's. Neelan Thiruchelvam's seventh was less than a fortnight earlier. Ketheeswaran follows a long list of committed Tamils who desired that their community would enjoy peace with dignity within a united Sri Lanka. They all knew that despite the reasonableness of their cause this was an uphill task. Current developments give us ample insight into why this is so and might so remain for decades to come.

The LTTE-intelligence related web site *Nitharsanam* devoted 7 lines to the killing of Kethees. It began, "*Infamous traitor of the Tamil race Ketheeswaran Loganathan was shot dead a short while ago. Known as Tamil Betrayer Kadirgamar Junior, he was deputy head of the government Peace Secretariat...*" This derisive snigger is the stamp of the killers, their very nature and their values that are the antithesis of decency and true heroism. The implicit boast in the killing and its timing is that this organisation can and would pick off its unarmed opponents at will, should they persist in giving hope to the people.

As for hope, this killing of one individual comes amidst a massive humanitarian catastrophe in the North-East, and its significance is prone to easy misrepresentation at popular level, which is also a significant factor in the timing. The humanitarian catastrophe throws into relief the institutional incapacity of the Sinhalese dominated State to respect civilian life and property of minorities in the North-East. Following the mainly government shelling of Muslim-dominated Muttur town, refugee camps of the Tamil displaced and places of refuge such as churches where civilians gathered during confrontations, have been relentlessly bombed or shelled. Inevitably the Muslim civilians are caught between the duplicity of both the security forces and the LTTE.

Take the experience of the twice or thrice displaced in the last 4 months from a camp of about 1500 families south of Muttur: "*When the planes bombed I ran, barely looking behind, I saw the dead scattered like fish on a dry tank bed.*" No LTTE military facility was nearby nor could its cannon threaten Trincomalee harbour from there. There are literally hundreds of such testimonies. Amidst such suffering where the final civilian death tolls might rise to several hundred, what is then the relevance of the Ketheeswaran, Kadirgamar, Thiruchelvam and what is presented as a handful of other dissidents? The answer is literally, everything.

There are also other testimonies coming from experiences victims and that is why, however many of its people the LTTE kills, the dissident phenomenon shows no signs of abating. Both in print and in interviews with refugees, one hears a good deal of spontaneous dissidence. People question the LTTE's right to attack the Army in a manner that places civilians at risk, often using them effectively as shields; its strategies that deliberately contrive civilian

casualties and its by now well known incapacity to agree to any political settlement that obliges it to respect human rights.

In conversations among ordinary people they are well aware of the hypocrisy. When LTTE functionary Daya Master had a heart ailment, they appealed to Kethees' Peace Secretariat, which arranged for urgent medical attention. According to well placed media reports in Colombo, children of LTTE functionaries used their privileged contacts with the Government during the peace process to send their children abroad for a Western education, while the young at home were being dragged from their mothers and seasoned as cannon fodder. Why were then Ketheeswaran and other dissidents traitors?

The dissidents knew well that fascism, hypocrisy, criminality and systemic reliance on assassination were natural outgrowths of the LTTE's past choices coming from intolerance and egomania and a total rejection of common morality. They also knew that the Sinhalese polity was the root cause of this phenomenon acquiring a totalitarian grip over the Tamil people. Meanwhile Tamil dissidents with clarity of mind faced a constant thinning down of their ranks. There was absolutely no room for them to talk to the Tamil people, give them hope and to form mass organisations. If they chose to remain in this country, they were condemned to lead fairly lonely lives in Colombo with just a few friends who gave them some space to articulate their ideas.

Lonely Battles

It is the universal conviction of dissidents that only a political settlement that offered the Tamils and Muslims peace with dignity would undermine the LTTE's grip. The cause of the Tamil-speaking people of the North-East was articulated more than 50 years ago by S.J.V. Chelvanayakam of the Federal Party and more urgently after the intolerance signalled by the Sinhala Only Act of 1956. His demands were for an end to discrimination on the basis of language, and a working recognition of the home of the Tamil-speaking people – the Northern and Eastern Provinces – so that the cultural and linguistic character of the region would be protected without prejudice to the rights of the Sinhalese.

Such a demand would have seemed fair and necessary in most parts of the world and, many would argue, sanctioned as a basic right in UN covenants such as the ICCPR and ICESR to begin with. Instead of addressing the basic issue, which became also one about Tamil security, we have spent 50 wasted years on hair splitting arguments about national sovereignty, homeland and differences between federalism and separatism. The basic issue became so confused among the Sinhalese that writers often tended to dwell on pros and cons without reaching any finality. Meanwhile there have been deliberate attempts backed by the State to solve the problem by violence and attrition particularly in the East. This lay at the root of the problems in Trincomalee this year that precipitated the resumption of war.

The Sinhalese polity had two choices. One is to treat the Tamils as a fifth column to be degraded and marginalised by a mixture of violence, attrition and deceit. The second is to trust them, take the plunge into federalism and build up a relationship of amity. Tamil dissidents have held that the latter is the only course that could keep Sri Lanka united.

After Chandrika Kumaratunge became president, there seemed to be an opportunity for Tamil dissidents to contribute towards pushing the second option. Neelan Thiruchelvam MP

contributed actively towards drawing up new constitutional settlement. A. Thangathurai MP used the thaw to obtain resources for the badly needed rehabilitation of displaced Tamils in Trincomalee District. Both were killed by the LTTE. The Kumaratunge government's initial commitment to a political settlement also enabled some dissident Tamils to contribute towards this objective through the state media. To the Tigers they were simply all traitors.

What the Tamil dissidents did not have is a mass organisation, only ideas and their commitment. Their fate thus became subject to changing illusions and volatility, both in the Sinhalese polity and also the NGO community in Colombo. After President Kumaratunge's attempt to push through a new constitution in August 2000 was undermined by the UNP at the 11th Hour by allying with the chauvinistic opposition, Kumaratunge's People's Alliance abandoned the urgency of a political settlement and tried to compete for the chauvinist vote. Among the consequences were the Bindunuwewa massacre of young Tamils at the rehabilitation centre in October 2000 and attempts to cover it up, followed by communal violence against Muslims in Mawanella in early 2001.

Ranil Wickremasinghe's UNP in collusion with a number of influential NGOs by late 1999 advocated a novel notion that since the LTTE had no interest in a political settlement, the way forward was to appease the LTTE, keep it quiet and let the rest of the country outside the North-East get on with economic growth and donor aid. Violation of human rights, not a novel idea in Southern politics, was to be winked at. This was the basis for the 2002 Norway-brokered ceasefire agreement, which literally signed the death warrant of hundreds of Tamil dissidents.

The UNP's calculation was that the Sinhalese voters would be grateful for ending open warfare. It took little account of the LTTE's past behaviour and that its provocations and habitual preparations for war would make the Sinhalese voter nervous. The result was, with tactical help from the LTTE, the election of Mahinda Rajapakse as president in 2005, whose government was hamstrung by its extremist allies, the JHU and JVP. On the one hand the Government had to show a nominal interest in a political settlement of the minority problem because of pressure from the international community and India. On the other, the extremist JHU and JVP influence was strong in the Defence Ministry, and the Government's human rights record particularly in the North-East took a downward spiral.

First there was nervousness in the South about the government forces being able to hold their own in the face of signs that the LTTE would resume open hostilities. Then early spring of this year saw new global strictures against the LTTE led by its banning in the EU and Canada, owing much to active voice of Tamil dissidents and supported by the US and India. In the same breath, the Western nations and India placed also the Government on notice demanding that it put forward a political settlement. Extremist elements in the Government urged by the JHU and JVP misread the signals and took the new spate of strictures against the LTTE as a cue for military adventurism to fulfill their ideological dreams in the East, ignoring the demand for a political settlement.

Warnings by the international community were met with an outburst of xenophobia with a strong anti-Tamil tinge, placing the country once more on the threshold of anarchy. A disturbing development was the presence of the Patriotic National Movement with its secretary Wimal Weerawansa of the JVP in Jaffna on 22nd July to address the security forces. The JVP's constant refrain in recent months has been that there is no ethnic problem, but only a terrorist problem; and that foreign agencies, the UN and Norway are on the side of the

terrorists. The latter is an oversimplification that fails to ask how outsiders would be struck by the Sinhalese polity's long and dismal record?

50 years after 1956, President Rajapakse found himself in a position similar to that of the SLFP's founder, Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, a vacillating tool of extremist elements that had helped his rise to power. This leaves Tamil dissidents with no role except to sit back and wait for the violence and illusions to exhaust themselves.

The lack of a clear perception of self-interest and a love of deceptive shortcuts did not allow the Sinhalese polity to take Tamil dissent into constructive partnership, with a clear long-term vision of the good of all Sri Lankans. Tamil dissidents were useful when campaigning for global strictures on the LTTE. Tamil human rights activists were useful when violations by the LTTE were a closely guarded secret that few dared to talk about. But today violations by the State too are hidden under a veil of terror, so that people are mortally afraid to come forward as witnesses. Does the South have the same space for human rights activism that many fought hard for during the decade prior to the 2002 CFA?

In joining the Norway-UNP bandwagon of appeasement of the LTTE, rather than building a robust human rights infrastructure and culture that entailed challenging the elimination of Tamil dissidents, the progressives in the South surrendered their capacity to resist repression. On the political front, the JVP and other extremists, who claimed to care about the human rights of Tamil dissidents during the years of ceasefire and who praise the Tamil Lakshman Kadirgamar for being useful in articulating Sri Lanka's case abroad, have conveniently forgotten that he also constantly pleaded for a federal solution to the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka. Tamil dissidents, who struggled for the rights and aspirations of their community, have found few genuine friends in the South, be it among the "progressives" or the "chauvinists".

Ketheeswaran's Place in the Tamil Saga

Ketheeswaran was consistent in his dedication to the welfare of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. In the early 1980s which saw growing communal violence directed at Tamils it was natural for a decent left oriented Tamil with an intellectual bent to join the EPRLF, which he did. The struggle he joined was destroyed by the LTTE in 1986. After very difficult times for his people, Ketheeswaran found openings for his interests in justice and a political settlement among Colombo-based NGOs. He strongly objected to the degradation of human rights in the 2002 ceasefire agreement and on occasions was almost alone in voicing his concern over the conscription of children in the Colombo NGO fora, which Norway, the NGOs and the Government wanted to downplay. Erik Solheim was quick to mark him out as an adversary.

Ketheeswaran never forgot that he had been a militant. He stayed on in the EPRLF and left it only in 1994 after differences with an individual who too later left. His background enabled him to easily make the transition to activism in civil society. He was constant in his concern that other militants too should be given the means and opportunity to come out into civil and political life. He pushed for the Norwegian initiated peace process to address this cause for all militants including from the LTTE. But after the Karuna split the Norwegians pinned the label 'paramilitary' on all non-LTTE groups and this effort came to a standstill.

Ketheeswaran wanted the Norwegian initiated process to go on, but became very upset and utterly disillusioned when the LTTE started a campaign of political killings, culminating in the assassination of T. Subathiran of the EPRLF in June 2003, a man he had known as a fine and committed human being. Kethees' writings and analyses became critical for dissenters who challenged the Norwegian approach to the peace process. This approach, while lax on human rights and democracy, looked for quick fixes as some crude arrangement convenient to the Government and the LTTE. Kethees was neither a romantic nor a mere analyst. Where possible he collaborated closely but quietly in challenging the forces opposed to human rights and democracy, whether it be the LTTE, the Government or the Norwegian facilitators. Unfortunately for him and his security, he became isolated even within the INGO and NGO community in Colombo that had been his home turf. His insistence on ensuring human rights in the peace process and his opposition to appeasement of the LTTE to the detriment of the people, resulted in his being further isolated, and to his peril, singled out and labelled a critic of the LTTE or simply 'anti-LTTE'.

Kethees would not be silenced, he voiced his own concerns about human rights and the primacy of a political settlement in a series of articles under the pen name Sathya in the *Daily Mirror*. The earlier Peace Secretariat headed by Jayantha Dhanapala had kept itself above the local political fray. When the Rajapakse presidency committed itself to a political settlement and offered Ketheeswaran the position of deputy head of the new Peace Secretariat, Kethees sought the opinion of his dissident friends. All were concerned for his security, but if the President was committed to a political settlement, many felt that it would be good for a Tamil to be in that position to push both a political settlement and human rights concerns. They were thinking of the Peace Secretariat as a body that could advise the President while keeping above the political fray. After his death and given the current reality where his fears are coming true, some of his NGO colleagues have expressed agreement with him. Had they done so four years ago, his cause would have developed the critical mass that would have minimised the danger to his life.

In time both the Government's human rights record and its commitment to a political settlement began to look dubious as the Defence Ministry and the President's allies, the JHU and JVP, began pushing him in their direction and he seemed to be caving in. The Peace Secretariat was being driven into a partisan role. Kethees constantly on his own asked his contacts for independent information on human rights violations and was determined to pressure the Government from within. Kethees knew about the plight of the 17 ACF workers stranded in Muttur. When the news of their killing came out on 6th August, Kethees was upset over his helplessness in the situation and was convinced that the Army was responsible. Six days later he was killed. As a person playing the role of a conscientious civilian he felt that he did not need security and had declined offers of it. He died another Tamil dissident caught up in fateful developments beyond his control.

When will the Sinhalese polity learn? While there is nothing sacrosanct about a united Sri Lanka after 50 years of dreary misgovernment in the North-East, most Tamils know that separation will result in the diminishment of all of us. We would go down as peoples who had so much in common, but could not muster enough tolerance and humanity put aside fond nationalist myths and live together. When will the Sinhalese polity learn that the dwindling numbers of Tamil dissidents who are picked up and dropped to suit the momentary whims of those in power are the last hope of a united Sri Lanka? There will be no united Sri Lanka after the fantasies of the JHU and JVP.

When will the Tamil expatriates learn to think responsibly about a force that has five times in 20 years presided over Jaffna being overrun or massively destroyed and civilians evicted and killed without any end in sight? They would easily do it five times again in the next 20 years simply for the egomania and survival of the leaders. When will they learn about a force that has tortured and killed thousands of dissidents and has only to show as its achievements thousands of vanished youths and children it used as cannon fodder and covered up its crime by flattering them with rows of martyrs' tombs? In the context of today's humanitarian catastrophe, the hapless people living in the LTTE controlled areas, long abused by the LTTE whom they cursed, are being callously attacked with government missiles. A number of children are among the injured in the Vanni receiving very rudimentary care in Killinochchi Hospital. Whether they were conscripts or school children, the Government dismisses them as cadres under training. In representing their plight the LTTE today carries no credibility internationally. This places on Tamil dissidents the responsibility to speak on their behalf.