

Terrorists until proved innocent?

A democratic government burdened with a protracted war against terrorism always has its work cut out. In this country, the government in power operates in a multi-ethnic environment unlike its enemy, the LTTE, which has, through a process of systematic ethnic cleansing, created a mono ethnic enclave where democracy is a thing of the past and infiltration could be kept at a bare minimum. Dissent is violently suppressed in that terrain and execution awaits anyone who assists in infiltration. Nobody talks about human rights of the people trapped in those areas and mum's the word on the part of even those vociferous defenders of human rights about the plight of those hapless people.

The biggest problem besetting the security forces is heavy infiltration, which has helped the LTTE launch many devastating attacks on both military and civilian targets. It is, therefore, natural that they are all out to nab infiltrators and pre-empt terror strikes. In trying to keep their elusive enemy at bay, they may think of remedies in terms of mass evictions and mass arrests. But, such measures militate against the democratic principles upon which civilised society rests. Therefore, it is the duty of the political authority to rein them in. War, it is said, is too serious a matter to be left entirely to generals.

Three Tamil political leaders—TULF President V. Anandasangaree, PLOTE President D. Sithadhan and EPRLF (Pathmanabha) T. Sritharan—who have proved their democratic credentials beyond any doubt by standing up to the LTTE and condemning its violence at the risk of their life and limb, have protested against the on-going arrest and detention of Tamil civilians in the wake of the recent LTTE terror strikes in the city. In a letter to President Mahinda Rajapaksa, while condemning the LTTE violence, they stress the need for respecting the democratic rights of the Tamils. They say: "We do not say that the Government should close its eyes and keep quiet. Conduct search operations, arrest anyone on suspicion but don't detain any innocent person unnecessarily even for a day." Can any reasonable person disagree with those gentlemen?

Several other politicians—both Tamil and Sinhala—have taken up the cudgels for the Tamil detainees languishing in appalling conditions. But, they have forfeited their moral right to speak of human rights as their true intention is not the protection of the rights of Tamils but discrediting the government and the State to

help the LTTE further its interests. If they are genuinely interested in safeguarding human rights, they must be able to condemn the violation of the rights of Tamil civilians under the LTTE's jackboot as well. One cannot be selective in championing human

rights which are common to all the people irrespective of their ethnicity, religion and other man made differences.

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Some of the Sinhala politicians who are shedding crocodile tears for Tamil civilians have a history of torture and murder of both Tamil and Sinhala youth. Where were those human rights champions in 1983, when a government sponsored pogrom was carried out against Tamils? And where were those international human rights groups when the Sinhala youth were tortured and killed in their thousands in the early 1970s and

the late 1980s? Believing in their human rights campaign will be like taking a bunch of butchers leading a campaign to save cattle seriously? Those hypocrites need to be told that they cannot hoodwink the discerning public.

Anandasangaree, Sithadhan and Sritharan point out that ultimately the innocent ones who are running away from the LTTE into the arms of the government are being penalized for no fault of theirs. When they are arrested and detained unnecessarily they become suspects even after their release in the eyes of their neighbours. This, they say, is exactly what the LTTE wants. The government must heed the appeal of these Tamil leaders lending their voice to the voiceless. They question the government's wisdom in cancelling the train service beyond Anuradhapura though Vavuniya is a cleared area. (While writing this comment we learnt that at a meeting with Anandasangaree, President Rajapaksa had promised to restore the train service to Vavuniya from today. That is a step in the right direction.) The LTTE is, no doubt, using that train to send in infiltrators. But, simply because the LTTE uses it, it is not advisable for the government to cancel its run up to Vavuniya. It is also being

argued that the LTTE might attack the train. Yes, that is a possibility. However, it has attacked not only trains but also buses. Are we going to cancel the bus service to Vavuniya as well? There are risks worth taking for the sake of the people. It is not only in Vavuniya that the LTTE is capable of attacking trains and buses. The outfit has attacked trains in Colombo and buses in places like Ambalangoda, hasn't it?

Bringing to the President's notice that the Tamils are in a situation where they can live peacefully neither in the North nor in the South, those three leaders ask a very pertinent question: "When protection is not forthcoming from the government where can they go? The only place left for those people, they point out, is the Indian Ocean.

The government is promising to break the LTTE's backbone before long. Many may look forward to the day when that feat is achieved. But, while working towards that goal, it must ensure that the people it says it is trying to liberate from the clutches of the LTTE will be treated with respect as equal citizens of this country. That, we believe, is exactly what Anandasangaree, Sithadhan and Sritharan are requesting the government to do. Treating all Tamils as terrorists until proved innocent is the wrong way to set about that noble task.

Recovering sovereignty: The Bank of the South

by Kath Noble

This looks like being a bad week for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and for their backers in Washington. The institutions are already unpopular in many countries after years of imposing their favoured economic policies on governments in return for loans to finance development work, and now they are set to face competition from an unexpected source. Seven states in Latin America, a continent that has suffered decades of economic and political interference at the hands of the United States, will sign an agreement for their own financial institution this Sunday. It is to be called the Bank of the South.

The idea is to set up a supply of cheap finance that will be controlled by the member countries themselves. They will contribute funds according to their ability, but lending decisions will be taken by all, and there will be no conditions.

It was first proposed about a year ago by the Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez, as part of his vision for an independent, integrated, and strongly socialist Latin America. It is proving to be a popular project. He has already recruited Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay, all but one of whom now have more or less leftwing govern-

ments, and a request for membership has also recently been submitted by the definitely rightwing leadership of Colombia. It is evidence of the comprehensive rejection of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund across Latin America.

The inauguration is to take place as the leaders gather in Buenos Aires for the swearing in of the newly-elected Argentinean President, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. It is fitting, for it was in that country that the tide really turned against the institutions after its economic meltdown and debt default, and she is taking over from the man who defied them by declaring that he would only pay foreign creditors a fraction of what was due, and who went on to adopt his own economic policies that saw the country recover, and almost eight million people climb back above the poverty line within four years. I refer to her husband, Nestor Kirchner, the current Argentinean President.

The Bank of the South is expected to focus on projects that will promote ties between the member countries and that will reduce asymmetries both within and between nations. It promises to contribute towards building a powerful bloc capable of looking out for their people in the face of the challenges presented by globalisation. Latin America lost a lot

of ground during the decades in which most countries in the continent accepted the neo-liberal policies that were being pushed on them by the United States. Per capita income adjusted for inflation grew by only 9% between 1980 and 2000, according to a Washington-based think-tank called the Centre for Economic Policy Research, compared with growth of 82% between 1960 and 1980. So people have high hopes for the Bank of the South.

I find myself thinking of a few lessons for Sri Lanka. This country also has to depend on borrowed money to develop, if not just to survive, and it has to decide from where it is going to get its loans. This poses a problem.

There was a great debate about the sovereign bonds that were issued by the Government recently, and both the UNP and the JVP spoke against the idea, saying that the interest rate offered was higher and the repayment period shorter than could be obtained from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Ranil Wickramasinghe sent his supporters to protest in front of the fund manager, HSBC, and promised to cancel their licence to operate in Sri Lanka in the event of his ever becoming President or Prime Minister. Now, I am not inclined to write in favour of borrowing \$500 million to build mega-ports, super-highways and coal-



fired power plants, but if that is what the Government decides it wants to do, and none of the political parties seems to think it is a bad idea, I suggest that it might well be better to pay more for the money, because at least these investors do not make any demands on the Government.

The World Bank has recently been keeping a bit quiet in Sri Lanka. It is a good thing, but it encourages us to forget what they are about. There is obviously not enough space to go into all the details here, but we can at least highlight the main issues on which the World Bank insists there must be movement for it to consider more than a minimum commitment to Sri Lanka.

The most important priorities for the World Bank, as far as can be seen from the criteria for lending set out in their last Country Assistance Strategy, are as follows: education has to be re-oriented; labour laws ought to be revised to reduce the protection provided to employees; farmers should be encouraged to sell their land; infrastructure in the water, power, port and railway sectors would be better off in the hands of the private sector; state spending needs to be both reduced and decentralised; the civil service should be slimmed down; state banks have to be

commercialised; the Samurdhi scheme must be cut back; and macroeconomic policies should be set to please the International Monetary Fund. And this is just the beginning, because their projects are littered with further efforts at interference in the running of the country, and this despite the fact that Sri Lanka only received around \$100 million from the World Bank last year, according to figures from the Central Bank, while it paid back more than \$40 million.

The International Monetary Fund last week reminded us of its recommendations when it released the report of its annual consultations with the Government. There is no agreement in place at the moment, and Sri Lanka received no money from the International Monetary Fund last year, just returned some \$150 million. Nevertheless, it suggested increasing the number of people and goods subject to tax, and making adjustments to interest rates. It then called for the privatisation of the remaining state banks. Its most strident demand was for fuel and electricity prices to be increased. These are relatively benign in comparison with the lists of actions that normally accompany an actual loan. They can probably be

ignored as long as the Government does not want any more money, because their influence over other lenders is fast diminishing, but it is clear that there are plenty of things that would have to be done if there were to be any chance of receiving cash from the International Monetary Fund.

I see all this as a question of sovereignty. It will sound quaint to those who have never gone without, no doubt, but I bet I am not the only one to view it that way.

Some people will agree with the policies outlined above, but they are probably not the majority in Sri Lanka. Ranil Wickramasinghe did his very best to push through the complete neo-liberal agenda when he was in power, just as he tried hard to stop the war, but it did not work. Letting the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have what they wanted was about as successful as his attempts at appeasing the LTTE. It did not bring either prosperity or peace and, perhaps more importantly, people simply did not agree with him, and Ranil Wickramasinghe soon ended up in the Opposition. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund pretend otherwise, but they know very well that people do not want the economic policies that they push. It is why they insist on loan agreements that include lists of actions to be taken by set target dates, and why they only disburse their money after careful assessments of progress by the Government.

Latin Americans think alike, it seems, and they will celebrate the recovery of a little more of their sovereignty this week as their leaders launch the Bank of the South. It will not be perfect, and nor will it solve all of their financing problems, but it is a start. It is possible only because a few countries have built up their currency reserves and are willing to use them to work towards a somewhat unconventional objective. India and China both outstrip Brazil when it comes to currency reserves, but there is not yet a Venezuela, or indeed an Argentina, in this part of Asia. Sri Lanka will have to find its own way for now. Meanwhile, let us not forget what we know about the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

