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## Sri Lanka: Karuna's allegations about IPKF's human rights violations

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By Col. R. Hariharan

Sri Lanka Deputy Minister Vinayagamurthi Muralitharan, known as Karuna Amman in his earlier incarnation as LTTE commander of Batticaloa, accused the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) of rape and killings during its war against the LTTE in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 90.

Speaking in Parliament on November 4, he said the IPKF had raped several Tamil women and also killed Tamils and "there is evidence for that."

Of course, as a parliament member Karuna has every right to draw attention to human rights violations, though it was made 26 years too late. In a democracy, human rights violations committed by any person including the army, police or anyone including political parties is totally unacceptable and cannot be condoned. They have to be inquired into. Human rights watchdogs have been created for this purpose.

But I have a problem when Karuna talks about human rights violations and killings. When he took over as Special Commander of Batticaloa in 1990, LTTE cadres under his command perpetrated some of the heinous killing of innocent civilians including women and children. These included the massacre of 175 Muslims praying in Kattankudy mosque and many other Muslims (some estimates say up to 300) including women and children in Kattankudy and Eravur.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) report of March 28, 2013 lists his other "achievements" in this period as LTTE leader: "In June 1990, 400 to 600 police officers who had surrendered to LTTE forces, many of whom may have been under Karuna's control, were bound, gagged, and beaten. The LTTE then executed the Sinhalese and Muslim police officers among them. Karuna has admitted that the LTTE committed

these killings in an interview with the BBC, but claims he was not at the scene. Under the legal principle of command responsibility, though, Karuna could still be criminally liable for the massacre even if he was not physically present.

“In another case, in July 1990, Karuna’s forces stopped a convoy of Muslims traveling in eastern Batticaloa district and executed about 75 people, including women and children. In August 1990 Karuna’s forces killed more than 200 civilians in two incidents in Batticaloa district,” it adds.

After Karuna broke off with the LTTE in 2004, he worked in support of Sri Lanka Army. During this period, he and his supporters have been accused of indulging in forced disappearances, recruitment of children as cadres, intimidation, extortion and even killings.

In March 2013 when Karuna asked for war crimes investigations for the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)’s alleged links of with the LTTE, Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch said “his [Karuna’s] LTTE forces were implicated in some of Sri Lanka’s most horrific abuses, so the government’s long-stalled war crimes investigations might as well begin with him.”

President Rajapaksa had chosen to ignore Karuna’s crimes for the support rendered by him and his cadres in aid of the Sri Lanka forces during the Eelam War. So far Karuna has not even apologized for his conduct during the LTTE days and thereafter, let alone showing remorse for the crimes.

This is not the first time such allegations against the IPKF have been aired. LTTE talked about them till its dying days. During IPKF days even the then Tamil Nadu chief minister Karunanidhi had spoken derisively of Indian People Killing Force; so did many other fringe Tamil parties (of course AIADMK was an exception to this).

But the DMK leader never thought of taking follow up action on the allegations during his nearly two decades of association as a coalition partner with the Congress at the Centre. Even Defence Secretary Gotabaya made a sly reference to IPKF’s alleged human rights violations when India voted against Sri Lanka in UN Human Rights Commission meeting. But he never went beyond this.

If Karuna had seriously wanted Sri Lanka’s human rights record set right he should have cooperated in an inquiry into the alleged killings and other crimes committed under his watch. Then his call for inquiry into the IPKF’s alleged human rights violations would carry conviction. But this has not happened. So why is Karuna raising this old issue now? Is he contemplating some serious follow up on it?

No such thought seems to have crossed Karuna’s mind. Karuna has been driven to political wilderness, marginalized by Rajapaksa and ignored Tamils. With little or no influence either personally or politically, his future looks bleak as he faces the parliamentary election next year. He runs the risk of being totally sidelined in the run up to the elections unless President Rajapaksa lends a helping hand.

So he is probably trying to ingratiate himself with President Rajapaksa by raising “vote-catching” issues in the coming elections. He probably

wants to deflect the attention from the UN inquiry into Sri Lanka's alleged war crimes by raising the IPKF atrocities issue. Similarly Karuna has used the issue of President Premadasa (of the UNP) arming the LTTE to settle scores with the UNP which had sought action against him for involvement in crimes during his LTTE days.

In his speech Karuna has also accused Northeastern Province Chief Minister Wigneswaran of working against Sri Lanka by supporting the UN probe into alleged Sri Lanka army war crimes in 2009. TNA has become bête noire of Mahinda Rajapaksa and any attack on them by a Tamil politician would be welcomed by him.

So Karuna's parliamentary speech is not merely about IPKF only. Allegations against the IPKF indirectly whip up the hardy perennial of Sri Lanka politics – India-baiting – which comes to the fore during the run up to the elections. So Karuna's purpose of the whole exercise appears to be limited to shoring up his own dwindling political fortunes and nothing more. It deserves to be ignored by Indian public because Karuna has little say in the scheme of things of Rajapaksa or Tamils.

As regards Karuna's allegations against the IPKF one may say wars always lead to human rights violations, though it does not lessen the seriousness of the allegations. But I feel, neither India nor Sri Lanka paid the attention the issue deserved either because human rights was not considered a big issue either politically or militarily at that point of time.

Personally, I felt that at least in two instances- Jaffna Teaching Hospital killings on October 27, 1987 (the day our family friend Rajendra Doraisamy SLAS, former Secretary, Ministry of Local Government, was also killed a few hundred yards from the hospital ) and the Valvettiturai retaliatory operations on August 2, 3, and 4, 1989 – Indian army should have done better than holding routine internal inquiries. But I am glad Indian army is now serious about human rights violations and has a mechanism in place to handle these issues.

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