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Review: Sri Lanka 'We Will Teach You a Lesson: Violence against Tamils by Sri Lankan Security Forces', Human Rights Watch publication, 2013

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Thu, 04/02/2015 - 07:08

Paper No. 5904

Dated 02-Apr-2015

Guest Column by Prof. Charles Sarvan

This is a difficult document to read. Speaking figuratively, Shakespeare's Macbeth said that he had eaten too much of horrors. So it is with reading one testimony, one horror, after another: an emotional revulsion sets in; a wish to set a mental distance, if not escape.

What the 'Report' records is morally sick, and the sickening is to be avoided with repugnance, if not with aesthetic distaste. For example, when one reads that a sharp needle was inserted in the penis of men. "In one case, this was used to insert small metal balls into their urethra [...] the metal balls were later surgically removed by doctors abroad" (p. 4). Yogalingam Vijitha, a 27-year-old Tamil woman from Jaffna was tortured and raped with a plantain-tree flower. These "flowers are hard and cone-shaped" (page 19). On the 17th of May 1997, police officers raped Murugesupillai Koneswamy of Batticaloa in her home and then detonated a grenade in her genitals, both to kill her and to hide evidence of gang-rape (ibid). "Subramaniam Kannan, a man from Vavuniya [...] had barbed wire inserted into his rectum" (p. 21).

An understandable impulse is to stop reading, close the 'Report' and put it out of sight and mind. But what then of the victims, the human beings who experienced and must for ever live with this trauma? They can never put the experience aside, as we the 'report'.. Those who have been tortured, or have undergone a similar extreme experience, never recover. They never regain their former self; they remain for ever tortured or raped. What was a single happening is, in fact, life-long damage.

Twenty-three old Jyoti Singh Pandey was gang-raped in a Delhi-bus on 16 December 2012, and subsequently died of her injuries. The case caused justified outrage nationally and internationally because, among other reasons, Ms Pandey became an individual to us with a life of

her own, parents and home. She was a living and real human being, and we could relate to her tragedy. But the cases documented in this 'Report' are faceless and nameless as a precaution against reprisal violence wreaked on his or her family in Sri Lanka.. The 'Report' aims to be factual and objective, and so the facts are deliberately recorded dispassionately: the human cost is what the reader must perceive; the moral indignation, sympathy and protest are what s/he must add. The phrase, 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' is clinical concealing rather than conveying lived experience.

In the introduction we are told the 'Report' is the result of in-depth interviews with Tamil detainees now abroad, conducted over a 12-month period in places as diverse as Australia, the UK, Germany, India, Malaysia and Indonesia. Its main focus is on the period 2006-2012. Seventy-five cases of rape were investigated, 31 of men, 41 of women and 3 of boys (page 2). In 67 of the cases, independent medical evidence was obtained with the consent of the victims.

Sexual violence usually begins with sexual humiliation, forced nakedness, verbal threats and mockery; with the deprivation of privacy for women when they use the toilet or have a bath. The intention is to degrade and humiliate: We will teach you a lesson. (The word "teach" implies transgression and punishment: the victims "deserve" the treatment meted out. Seeing themselves as instruments of retributive racial justice, crude and appallingly sadistic torturers and rapists can take pride in their action. The victims, not they, are to blame.) Sexual abuse was "frequently carried out by more than one person, often with multiple onlookers, including women members of the security forces" (p. 33). Under torture and rape, even the innocent confessed and went so far as to identify other supporters of the Tamil Tigers – even though they didn't know them at all (p. 33). But confession did not stop rape and torture. In some cases, family members paid money and the victim was allowed to "escape".

The police force has been militarized and the armed forces exercise police powers. Both act with complete impunity over a population that is defenceless and fears further harassment if complaints are lodged. It would be like sheep complaining to foxes and wolves about the behaviour of foxes and wolves. There is "no category of Tamil who, once taken into custody, is immune from rape and other sexual violence" (p. 36) – unless, one would add, s/he were wealthy or had influential Sinhalese contacts. The use of sexual violence is not "just a local occurrence or the action of rogue security personnel", but despite the many cases reported, not one senior officer has been prosecuted for crimes of this nature. On the other hand, given the conservative nature of Tamil society, there is a reluctance to talk about sexual molestation and rape. "The issue of male rape and sexual violence against men has neither been raised nor addressed." It is suppressed both by victims and perpetrators, and remains a taboo subject (p. 45).

Finally, given government restrictions and the impossibility of carrying out independent investigation, the cases recorded here are but the tip of the proverbial iceberg: the majority still within the confines of 'the Paradise Isle' suffer in silence. One shudders to think of the fate of the many still in custody. They are unknown; what is done to them, unseen; their cries unheeded by those present, unheard by others. The few whose experience is recorded in the Report are both safely abroad, and willing to re-live the horror by giving testimony. Rape "in formal and

informal detention centres *continues* (p. 29.Emphasis added) and the “Sri Lankan government’s response to allegations of sexual violence by the security forces has been crude and disdainful” (p. 43).

Human Rights Watch makes severe criticisms of the Tamil Tigers, for example: “During the first four months of 2009, more than 300,000 civilians were trapped in areas of fighting, effectively used as ‘human shields’ by the LTTE, with limited access to food, water, and medical care. The LTTE forcibly conscripted civilians and prevented others from fleeing LTTE-controlled areas by firing at them, killing many” (p. 13) Yet I anticipate that the ‘Report’ will lead some to question the impartiality of Human Rights Watch, and to dismiss their findings as the work of misguided Westerners sympathetic to the Tigers.

“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” (T S Eliot, ‘Gerontion’)

(The views expressed are author's own. Professor Sarvan is located in Germany and takes a keen interest in Sri Lankan Affairs)

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