

# TODAY THE NGOS; TOMORROW...

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While Sri Lankan troops consolidate themselves in Jaffna, the efforts to root out the enemy within and without are growing evermore frantic. LTTE suicide squads in Colombo and its propaganda machine abroad provide ample justification for a psychology of hysteria to prevail. However, another psychological factor intervened recently to add to the tension and create the ugly incident involving the NGOs last week. There was the fear that once again the government would have been cheated out of its bid to capture Jaffna and utterly vanquish the LTTE. The taking of Jaffna is the crowning jewel of the government's military campaign. In 1987 the Sri Lankan armed forces led by Lalith Athulathmudali were all set to regain Jaffna. But in a blow to Sri Lankan sovereignty India opposed this campaign.

There is still a lingering fear of foreign intervention that will cheat the nation of a final victory. The NGOs and international organisations are seen as doing the same as the Indians in 1987 albeit in a more subtle way. Indicative of this resentment was the mob attack that disrupted a planned NGO gathering at a beach resort hotel in Bentota.

The highly publicised attack on the NGO gathering was the culmination of a series of disturbing events. The first was the growing international concern expressed about the situation of civilians displaced by the military offensive in the Jaffna peninsula. The call for humanitarian assistance was taken up by several local and international NGOs. Then came the arrest of two Catholic priests on their way to the north 'with prohibited items' (though police investigations appear to reveal their innocence) and confessing links to NGOs.

Putting these events together and identifying a possible LTTE-NGO link has not been difficult. It has also provided a ready stick to bash those who speak against the war and its human costs.

It is to the credit of Minister S.B. Dissanayake, and his credibility with different polarised sections of the population that he was willing to explain matters to mobs that repeatedly physically attacked the NGOs with almost no peacekeeping intervention by the police.

The uncooperative attitude of the police to keep the peace may have suggested a government hand in the sordid affair. Minister Dissanayake's intervention indicated that the PA government has not yet succumbed to the politics of thuggery like its UNP predecessor. But there are ominous signs on the horizon. Instead of dealing with the real issues arising out of the government's military offensive there are many who seem to be out on a witch hunt. This may be seen as an easy way to suppress dissident voices and the voice of conscience itself.

## Purposeful

An earlier illustration of this dubious strategy was perhaps to be seen in the Kenneth Mulder case. The American missionary's crime was that he produced one or two computer print outs (on A4 sized paper) of a bleeding white lotus. In view of the fact that the white lotus movement's main slogan is "War today for peace tomorrow" and war implies blood this artistic depiction of the white lotus movement was not improper.

Nevertheless, for his artistic endeavors to depict reality more graphically through the language of symbols, Kenneth Mulder was arrested, disgraced by the arresting authorities and media and deported. The offices of the National Christian Council which was Mulder's host organisation were raided. House searches were done of the Tamil staff members. Front page press stories followed. Nothing was found

But the desired impact may have been achieved. The once powerful voice of the National Christian Council with its mixed Sinhalese and Tamil membership calling for peace through peaceful means and the protection of the oppressed has fallen considerably silent, not strangely though in view of the campaign against it. The lesson that silence is golden could not have been lost on the much larger Catholic Church as well.

Likewise last week's attack against the NGO gathering may have been designed with a similar motivation. It is difficult to imagine that the attack was not an orchestrated one. Three thousand people do not spontaneously come together to protest, throw stones and charge into luxury hotels. Most surprisingly government-owned television stations, usually last on the air when the unexpected happens (as at the Kolonnawa oil tanks), on this occasion were sharp on time to beam the news to the nation.

In addition, prior to the NGO gathering the media had sought to show the possibility of links between the NGO community and the LTTE. The day prior to the planned meeting the government-controlled newspapers, but also independent newspapers published front page headline stories denouncing the planned NGO gathering and alleging that its purpose was to pressurise the government into calling off the military campaign in the north.

However there was nothing secret about the meeting. It had been organised by the NGO Forum on Sri Lanka in March during the time of the cessation of hostilities. The NGO Forum consists of a handful of international NGOs working in Sri Lanka together with their local NGO partners. The NGO Forum has met yearly since 1990 to discuss important issues relating to their work. Most local NGOs do not work in politically sensitive areas. They do solid and unglamorous work in savings and credit, income generating, pre-schools and health.

## Short-sighted

At this year's meeting of the NGO Forum the topics to be discussed were economic development, human rights and NGO partnership in addition to the more sensitive topics of peace and humanitarian assistance. It is quite absurd to believe that at a large meeting of around eighty NGOs, almost all of them local, that anything 'anti-Sri Lanka' could ever have been decided upon.

Most local NGOs, it would be quite safe to say, have tacitly accepted the government's position that the present military offensive is necessary to usher in peace. It has been only a handful of them such as the National Peace Council, Women for Peace and MIRJE, that have dared to defy the tide of popular sentiment and protested against the human costs of the war. The ideal of seeking peace through peaceful means alone has been as lonely in NGO circles as in the country at large.

By giving high prominence to the mob attack on the NGO gathering, the government-controlled media and the high-ups of today who give it instructions apparently acted without considering the longer term implications of their actions. One government-controlled newspaper went so far as to describe as "supporters of LTTE terrorists" those who asked for humanitarian concern to be shown to the displaced citizenry of the north. Though such slanted reports the NGO 'traitors' were vilified, and by implication the mob who opposed them glorified as 'patriots'.

The danger in giving positive publicity to mob attacks, whether righteous or not, whether spontaneous or not, is that they encourage people to take the law into their own hands. Today, while the war is being fought, enraged mobs of people believing themselves to be patriots attack as traitors those who call for humanitarian relief. Short sighted government officials, such as those who used bigoted language to describe the NGOs as 'vultures' living off the sufferings of others, may consider this to be a welcome silencing of troublesome voices.

But tomorrow, after the war is won, those same 'patriots' who threw stones at the NGOs may consider it their duty to physically attack those who call for the implementation of the government's devolution proposals.

Then it will not be the NGOs whose necks will be on the chopping block but those of the government leaders who have pledged themselves to implement the devolution proposals for ethnic harmony and lasting peace. Only with the implementation of the devolution proposals would the victory of today not be in vain, but the mob may think otherwise.