

Transcript

**Dr Radha D'Souza's comments to TamilNet on 05 October 2012
at the book launch event of former BBC correspondent Frances Harrison**

[Dr D'Souza was speaking to TamilNet after witnessing the panel discussion participated by Mr. Erik Solheim, the former peace envoy and ex-minister of international development from Norway, Dr. Alan Keenan, the Sri Lanka director of the International Crisis Group and Ms Yasmin Sooka, who was one of the three UNSG expert panel that brought out a report on the war in the island of Sri Lanka.]

The whole evening was an extremely interesting trend, because it targeted the diaspora.

When something as traumatic as what has happened to the Tamil Nation, there is bound to be internal conversations and differences within the community on how we should go forward.

What I saw this evening was an intervention to tilt the discussion in a direction, which says forget Eelam.

We had a two-hour program where there was not a single mention of Eelam except at the very end when Solheim said 'Oh, there must be a political solution'.

A political solution is neither here or there.

Is Eelam still an issue or not an issue?

The entire international community's effort now is to use the tragedy to move the debate from the question of a homeland to a question of finding some sort of scapegoat, who will be sentenced or punished or whatever.

So, what they were effectively saying this evening – all three of them together – is that forget Eelam, we'll find a few scapegoats; we won't call it genocide, but we'll call it something that went terribly wrong, punish a few scapegoats, find a few people here and there, give them a trial, finish it off, no Eelam and that was the end of the moral struggle.

This is the line that they want the Tamil nation to accept.

Whether the Tamil nation accepts it or not is a different issue, and it is for the nation to debate and discuss amongst themselves. This is point one.

I was completely gobsmacked by the kind of things that they were trying to sell to the audience – there was a UN Human Rights official sitting there telling us she has never been to Sri Lanka, because the government did not allow her to go there and yet they wrote the report.

Here is the UN, which authorizes NATO intervention, military intervention in so many countries as we are watching everyday on TV, and here is an official of that authority saying ‘oh we couldn't do anything, we are helpless, because the Sri Lankan government is a sovereign state’.

Well I’m sorry, Iraq was a sovereign state, Iran is a sovereign state, they are all sovereign states. So this is a big issue that we need to consider why the entire UN machinery becomes completely disabled at some times and then within 10 days can mobilize an entire war in other places.

And I think this is an important issue for the entire international community to think about.

The second issue I found very shocking was Solheim saying that the international community could not do anything more, because they had actually tried everything and the parties – ultimately it was up to the LTTE in Sri Lanka – to sort out their differences.

Well I’m sorry the entire legal question of Self-Determination in the UN Charter as we have it today says that Self-Determination in the final analysis is up to recognition of other States.

We know today that if the Security Council wants to recognize a State as an independent nation then they can do a great deal to get all the other nation-states to come on board with their positions.

The Security Council never even considered the question of recognition of Tamil nation, they never even debated it, they never concerned it and they never talked about it.

So, let us look at it in a very discretionary way, from a purely legalistic point of view. How can a nation that wants self-determination become independent today?

It can only become independent if all the other states recognize it. And all the other states can recognize it, only if the Security Council initiates it.

The third thing I found that was quite ingenious was that the panellists were trying to say that the Sri Lankan government is supported by China and Pakistan and Iran, and that the arms that were supplied to the government were from Sri Lanka, Iran and Pakistan and those countries.

This is a complete distortion of what the geo-political game in South Asia today.

On the one hand, there is encirclement of India by China, by all various powers, it is true.

So, China has arms agreements with Sri Lanka, with Nepal, with Pakistan, with Bangladesh and so on.

But, it is also true that India is part of the geo-political encirclement of China.

This is something nobody talks about.

India trains Sri Lankan military officials and military generals. This has been an important issue in Tamil politics in India.

So, anyone who has even been reading the newspaper – let alone experts like Solheim, and UN officials, and people like that – will know that there has been a serious issue between the Tamil Nadu government in India and the federal government there over the training of military officers, generals, colonels and senior officials in India.

If you look back at history, if you look back at the Thimphu [Indo-Lanka] agreement that India facilitated, it was and Solheim was saying that India was part of the peace process.

I'm sorry, how is India part of the peace process?

If you look at the Thimpu agreement, India wanted a peace settlement without the LTTE.

Anybody who has some basic political sense will know that no peace agreement was possible without the LTTE.

So you have India doing that as far back as the Thimpu agreement, and then you have India today training Sri Lankan military officials for whatever.

So we have to try and understand what is really going on if we want to move forward.

There is obviously the big powers, which are contesting for Sri Lankan government's loyalty.

There is on the one hand UK, USA, India who want to pull Sri Lanka on their side because of the military bases they want. And then you have China who wants to pull it in another direction because of their geo-political interests.

We need to keep this overall picture in mind to be able to understand this.

I'll just say one last word about the geo-political interests.

If you look at the first Iraq war, the Kuwait war, one of the big issues for India at that time was that the western governments, the United States and the UK in particular, did not have any air flight spaces because the only military base they had in that region was Diego Garcia, and Diego Garcia was too far away for them to move their supplies, arms, planes, whatever, their military equipment all the way up to Iraq.

So the airspace over India was a major political issue at that point in time because the

Indian people did not want to give that airspace to US military ventures.

Since that time the United States and the UK have felt very very vulnerable in that region because Diego Garcia is the only place. And therefore, whoever gets Sri Lanka on their side, gets a major geo-political coup.

I think we need to understand the Tamil politics in the wider context of the international situation.

What was interesting about this evening, was that all the three panellists did not want to point any fingers or responsibility on the western governments or on India – these were the good guys, the bad guys was Pakistan and China in the international arena.

I think that one needs to really look at this in the future; look at it in terms of the wider issues that are panning out.

I just want to say one last word also, and I think I'm saying this because a lot of people do not mention this: We get so caught up in the Tamil-Sinhala issue that we forget sometimes what is happening to the Sinhalese people.

I know that in the anti-globalization movements that we have been working with since the 80's and 90's, one of the things that the Sri Lanka trade unions, not the Sri Lankan government, the Sri Lanka trade unions have been saying is that in the name of fighting the Tamils what the government is doing is to sell off more and more and more of Sinhalese territories to free trade agreements. Therefore, they were saying that almost all of Sri Lanka has been converted into a free trade zone. And we can't afford to forget this aspect of the problem, while we recognize and acknowledge that there are some serious problems between the Sri Lankan government and its dealings with the Tamils.

The Sri Lankan government has also been using the Tamil issue to fight the Sinhalese people, and if you know the free trade zones, there are no trade unions there, there are no minimum wages, people are working unending hours and ultimately there too it's the US and Britain who benefit.

So, these are people who are benefiting from both sides. Their benefiting by selling arms to Tamils, by pushing the Sri Lankan government in the name of genocide to give them a base there, and their pushing the Sri Lankan people to work for cheap labour, to work with appalling conditions because that is the condition on which they will support the Sri Lankan Government.

So, I think we need to have a third position, we can't afford to be 'either you are with the US or the Sri Lankan government', either you are with this side or that side.

We, as working people, as ordinary people in the world, need to have an independent position that reflects our conditions, which is bad for everyone.

On the genocide issue, I think it was ingenious in what they were trying to say because the genocide dimension in international law is quite explicit in the definition of what is the meaning of genocide.

It says, if any State makes a deliberate, knowing, takes steps to exterminate, or to oppress, or to deny any group of people their language, their culture, their history, their existence then it amounts to genocide.

In fact some of us have been arguing that the genocide dimension, and what he said was quite ingenious, because the genocide convention is very very clear on this – there is no ambiguity – and what they tried to say was “oh we are not lawyers and we can’t really talk about genocide.” This was the position of the United Nations representative. If the United Nations representative on human rights does not know the meaning of genocide what can people expect from them?

Now Solheim’s position was again very ingenious, he was saying, let us forget the genocide issue. But the real reason why the Tamils want the genocide issue is because they want to connect it to Eelam.

Well, they were trying to directly connect it to Eelam. But he had no answer, other than making it as a political rouse of the Tamils.

He could not answer the question, was it genocide, was it not genocide. None of the three panelists answered that very straightforward question.

Whoever asked that question, do you call this genocide, do you not call this genocide, yes or no. The UN person very clearly said no, it’s not genocide.

So one wonders what is genocide, if this is not genocide...under the definition.

The others dodged the issue completely, they did not answer, yes or no, it was a very simple question.