



5 April 2004

## Tamils give clear electoral Support for the Tigers – For Peace with Justice

The simple matter of voting in an election is not so simple if you are Tamil living in the island of Sri Lanka. Because the Sri Lankan authorities refused to have ‘polling stations’ in the areas that are controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the people had to travel long distances and suffer hardship just to vote. In fact, because it took so long to reach the official polling stations some people had to travel the previous day and spend the night in makeshift centres. But it was worth the effort. The results of the Sri Lankan elections held on April the 2<sup>nd</sup> show that the people living in the north east of the island have voted overwhelmingly for the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) – winning 22 seats in the Sri Lankan parliament.

The stated policies on which the TNA contested the election can be summarised as:

The Tamils have a right to national self-determination on their historic homeland in the North and East of the island. The LTTE is the sole representative of the Tamil people and that the Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) proposals put forward by the LTTE during the peace process should be the base for the negotiations with the Sri Lankan government.

### History of oppression

In fact, once before, in fact 27 years ago, the Tamil people had voted to live independently from the Sinhalese because of the unbearable oppression that they had to endure. The Multi-dimensional oppression that the Tamils faced in Sri Lanka finds its genesis in the British colonial period. For the British, who took over from the Dutch in 1796, the small island Sri Lanka (previously called Ceylon) was critically important because of its strategic location. Situated in such an important position with respect to its most valued colonial possession India, Britain used the island primarily as a military outpost. In fact the significance of the natural deep sea harbour found in Trincomalee in the north-east of the island overlooking the main sea routes was noted by the Portuguese as early as the 16th century.

At the time separate Sinhala and Tamil kingdoms existed in the island. The Portuguese and the Dutch did not see it necessary to disturb the independent existence of these kingdoms. It was the British, for what it called its ‘administrative convenience’, forcibly ‘unified’ the Tamil north-east and the Sinhala south into one unit. The British colonialists, well known for their expertise at the use of the ‘divide and rule’ strategy did not unify the island to bring together the Sinhala and Tamil peoples together to oppose British rule! They did it for their strategic interests of long term control of the island and the region. This action laid the basis for the land inhabited by Tamils in the North and East coming onto the control of the Sinhalese.

At first the island was used almost exclusively as a military outpost to continue the economic exploitation of Britain’s ‘Jewel in the Crown’ -

India. The British in fact avoided unnecessary conflict with the inhabitants of the island. It was at a later period when the British started the plantation economy the second dimension of the oppression of the Tamils was introduced. India, which unlike Sri Lanka (Ceylon) was exploited most brutally by the British colonialist. So the British, instead of antagonising the Sinhala peasantry and cause instability in this their military outpost, brought hundreds of thousands of Tamils from the now impoverished India to work as virtual slave labour in the central hill country of the island. First it was coffee then Tea. The Tea plantation economy became successful to the British at a terrible cost to the Tamil plantation workers. In fact apart from the profits the British gained



**The young mother has come all the way from a district called Mullaithivu to cast her vote**

the economy of the island expanded with many gaining profits at the expense of the of the Tamil plantation workers blood and sweat. In this way the British created the hierarchy where the Sinhalese began to look down on the Tamils, who the British treated as slaves whereas they the Sinhalese were not treated so.

When the British left the island in 1948, it was not surprising that they gave total power to the Sinhala elite who had gained such advantages out of British rule. The Sinhala elite continued from where the British left off. First thing they did was to take away the voting rights of the Tamil plantation workers. Racial oppression of the Tamils grew with Sinhala gangs running riot killing Tamils in their houses and in the street and destroying their properties. Anti-Tamil riots occurred from 1958 onwards with great regularity until in 1983 it hit the headlines in the world media when approximately 3000 Tamil people were slaughtered within matter of days - countless amount of property was destroyed and tens of thousands of refugees created. The major political parties which were Sinhala dominated used anti-Tamil slogans in competition with each other. Anti-Tamil legislations like the 'Sinhala only act' which removed official status from the Tamil language and requiring higher entrance scores from Tamil students competing to enter university went hand in hand with regular bouts of mob violence against Tamil civilians. For several decades Tamils used strictly non-violent means of protest against their oppression – this only increased the violence against them. Then they demanded, again with non-violent their national rights – the right to rule themselves in the north and east. This peaceful road culminated in the elections in 1977 where the Tamil people gave their parliamentary party the TULF the mandate for an independent state. Again this was met with more force.

## Armed struggle

It was only when the peaceful road was exhausted that the Tamil people began to put their weight behind the armed struggle adopted by the LTTE. By then it was clear to them that without the power of arms the Sinhala racism would destroy them. The Sri Lankan state responded to the rise of the LTTE with a vicious and vindictive war against the Tamil civilians. But the LTTE was able to resist the larger force of the Sri Lankan state – with the armed force supported and sustained by the Tamil people. LTTE responded to every escalation and became capable of fighting the Sri Lankan state to a standstill.

## The cost of war

The long and intense war, which had continued for over 20 years had not only directly claimed the lives of 65,000 people but it had reduced the Tamil north and east into a desolate 'moonscape' with the complete destruction of the infrastructure and severely undernourished people, it had also driven the economy of the Sinhala majority south into near collapse. Even the Sinhala business community realised the futility of the 'war for peace' policy pursued by the earlier Government of Chandrika Kumaratunge because it realised that crushing the LTTE militarily on which this policy was based on - was unrealisable. The LTTE signalled their willingness to participate in a peace process mediated by the Norwegians by putting into effect several unilateral cease-fires during the latter end of the Chandrika's 'Peoples Alliance' government's rule. LTTE's initiative paved the way for the peace process to start after Ranil Wickramasinghe's United National Front government was brought into power by a war weary population.

## The peace process in crisis

For well over two years the Norwegian mediated peace process has been successful in stopping the war – but it has failed miserably to reconstruct the war destroyed areas in the North and East and rehabilitate the mass of refugees who had to flee their homes. The Sri Lankan government gave in to the military logic by not removing the soldiers occupying Tamil homes, schools etc in the Jaffna peninsula. Power hungry Chandrika, abuses her presidential power to recklessly put the peace process into jeopardy. The United States, uses its ban on the LTTE to exclude it from attending a crucial meeting of the crucial preparation meeting for the aid conference for the reconstruction by holding the meeting in Washington. The USA insists on maintaining a ban on the LTTE by including it in the 'terrorist list', Britain and Australia follows – this is despite the fact that the Sri Lankan government itself has effectively lifted its ban. The pressure from USA and other countries to sideline the LTTE and disturb the equilibrium in the peace talks only gives encouragement to extreme Sinhala chauvinists forces, and those who want a militaristic solution. It gives the impression to them that the USA, Britain and possibly India will support their reckless attempts to look for a military solution. The election results have brought 'war for peace' Chandrika into power. She has made an alliance with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) who do not even recognise the peace process. Nine seats in the parliament has gone to the extreme Sinhala chauvinists.

The Tamil people have shown the world that they are a risen people. They only want their right to live in freedom and in peace. People concerned with justice, human rights, and peace should make an open stand with the Tamil people and put pressure on their own governments to do the same.

You can find other  
versions of Ohlay at

[www.humanrights.de](http://www.humanrights.de)



V.i.S.d.P: Sivasothy Varatharajah - **Solidaritätsgruppe für das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Tamilen** - Postfach 10  
27 61 - 33527 Bielefeld - Tel : 0178 / 89 22 400 - Fax: 0521 / 98 91 586 - ohlay@humanrights.de

In Zusammenarbeit mit: Internationaler Menschenrechtsverein Bremen - imrv@humanrights.de - Fax: (0421) 498 72 76