

Pottuvil massacre: Perverts of the mafia

by Lalin Fernando

What thinkest thou, if he hath treated the truth as a lie and turned his back? Doth he not know that God seeth?

Nay, verily, if he desireth not, we will assuredly seize him by the forelock! The lying sinful forelock! Then let him summon his associates;

We too will summon the guards of hell: Nay! obey him not; but adore, and draw nigh to God

—Quran, 96, 1-19

'Truth is the first casualty of war'

A deed most foul

Eleven Muslim labourers in the Eastern Province had on September 18 gone to Rattal Kulam, Raddala in Pottuvil to restore an irrigation tank for a Muslim contractor. Ten of the labourers were found brutally hacked, cut and chopped to pieces that night. It had been a silent attack. No guns were used for very good reasons. The location was about 9km from the STF camp. The attackers left in a great hurry, their work not fully completed. Why were they in a hurry? It was almost identical to the slaughter of 12 Sinhalese irrigation workers in Welikanda last May and no different to all such massacres perpetrated by the LTTE since 1984 including Arantalalwa. It had the revolting and unmistakable DNA of the LTTE. It was as clear as daylight in the minds of reasonable people as to who was responsible. Shock, sorrow, outrage and revulsion swept through the land.

The survivor

Fortunately, there was one survivor of the massacre, Hamza Meera Mohideen, 60 years old, now receiving treatment in the Ampara General Hospital. He apparently has unequivocally told the doctor who attended on him and the driver of the vehicle that took him to hospital that the attackers were LTTE and spoke in Tamil. His bed head ticket incontrovertibly supports this. He said they had been attacked with swords, scythes and axes. However, he has not been able to give a formal statement as he is bleeding from his throat. Being the only willing and accessible witness to this horrific killing his evidence will banish all doubts and seal the case of this war crime. However everything except peace is possible in this land. Witnesses and many others can be bought all the while. Ask the butcher, the \$350 million banker and the failed president maker.

Timber trade and the incident

The Pottuvil timber merchants had for some time enjoyed a roaring illicit timber trade partnered by the LTTE who received a commission. As the police had been ineffective, the STF were recently tasked to crack down on this unlawful activity. The STF successfully countered the moves of the law breakers. Ill feeling arose fuelled by the greed of the merchants and their backers the politicians. Attempts to bribe the STF as it happens all too frequently elsewhere, failed dismally. Shortly before this incident 27 carts involved in the lawless trade were detected by the STF and handed over to the Forestry Department. Only 15 carts had illicit timber. The remainder had only implements like axes and saws etc. used for felling the timber. The owners of the carts insisted that as the 15 carts did not have timber in them they should be released. The law is clear. Accessories to the illicit action are also

liable to confiscation. Ill feeling and frustration of the mafia increased. A drastic drop in the trade followed. It had signalled the death throes of the mafia.

The perversion

Next morning, within hours of the bodies being brought to Pottuvil the mafia dons, a combination of timber merchants and politicians got into the act. They saw how the tragedy could be put to use to recover their losses. They knew how the fickle minds of the easily misled citizens worked. They knew that it was only needed to cast some doubts, whip up a frenzied crowd and turn it into a mob to pressurise

people of Pottuvil were protected from the worst of the violence that the LTTE offered. In addition STF resources were made available to the people to help them even in their daily lives. It gave the Muslims great confidence and strength and won their hearts and minds. What then provoked them to blame the STF for the deaths of the murdered ten workers and demonstrate bitterly for three days against the very STF that had been their protector and friend? When news of the killings was known the traders put up their shutters in protest. The STF felt aggrieved and humiliated. They too had felt the depth of the sorrow and grief of

as well. He wants the police to tackle that and also the discipline of the STF saying they have no military police (MPs) like the army! Imagine it, police policing its own elite unit. He wants a Muslim homeguard to be created. Obviously it will have to be one that will look up into the tree as the mafia chops away. In any case this is not within his writ but he has the freedom of the wild ass. He must be gifted with a unique sense of humour to believe that the police in Pottuvil could tackle the illicit felling of timber. In his innocence he does not know of the great relief palm oil gives. The LTTE is ever ready to exploit any weakness that might appear as even

of 19 September 2006 in the last but one paragraph states with reference to Pottuvil "The LTTE and the Tamil people will be supporting the Hartal called by the Muslim people". It is very clear that whoever created trouble in Pottuvil had the LTTE as an ally. Unless there is political backing there never will be group/mob violence. It is anybody's guess who the leaders of the rioters in Pottuvil were. They were hidden collaborators of the LTTE.

Collaborators wishes

The persons mainly responsible for this about turn of affairs are suave, double tongued politicians who work in the shadows as an ally of the LTTE to insure themselves. They were seen with the mobs that disturbed the peace in Pottuvil. They later made three cunning statements in English. Hypocritically the first was that they had the greatest respect for the STF. The second was that they were not putting the blame on anyone in particular but that there could be suspects other than the LTTE. This clearly was to create a doubt where none existed. As the STF was the only other armed group in the area it was abundantly clear whom they meant. The third showed their purpose. They said there was a demand for one particular STF officer [Saman Gooneratne] to be transferred. Gooneratne a former national boxing champion was the officer who broke the illicit timber mafia. If the STF was suspect of such a ghastly massacre why go after just one officer of the unit? Does it make sense? Finally a last request was for an international investigation. At this rate the UN would not have anyone to investigate in other countries. This is now a burning issue!

Mussolini of the East

Some politicians may forgive and forget the massacre at Kattankudy of nearly 100 Muslims in the mosque. That is something no true Sri Lankan Muslim Tamil or Sinhalese would do. But the fear and awe of Prabhakaran like a modern Hitler makes Mussolinis of some. It makes them collaborate with the LTTE and dream of carving out kingdoms for themselves in an elusive Eelam. They look at the adjoining agricultural and jungle timber lands in Lahugala lasciviously like Mussolini did at Libya and Ethiopia. They may be reminded of what the Italians did to Mussolini at the end. Hopefully the tale will not hang there. Meanwhile they may soon have to face the wrath of the legal process in the land for many unlawful activities including stirring dissension against the state's law and security officers during a national emergency and conspiracy to commit theft of timber. However, creating communal disharmony, for which they are well-known, comes naturally to these people.

Ten people brutally killed. Grief and sorrow for their lives bartered for the hope of illegal timber contracts by the Pottuvil mafia led by a discredited politician. This truth will live to haunt those misguided people who supported the unrest in Pottuvil last week. Even if Hqi Gooneratne is transferred, the STF will continue its work. The STF is an organisation. It never fails to successfully complete its missions. The perverts will be consigned to deepest hell.

*He prowls about in search of wealth
But has no skills to recognize
Our things of worth: we need no stealth
To mask them from his paupers eyes.
(Norman Cameron)*



the authorities. A mass media hunting daily for sensational news would cap their efforts by broadcasting their versions and whipping up public concern. It would provide the mafia an escape route. The STF, their *bete noire*, became the victims. The mafia believed they could shackle the STF and resuscitate their criminal activities, while collaborating treacherously with the LTTE. Their sorrow for the people who had been massacred was subordinated to their greed for money. That scenario sadly was not the preserve of the Muslims only as we have learnt to our cost.

Hakeem

It was pathetic to read that one Hakeem who apparently had the ear of the mobs had said that the STF, its commandant DIG Nimal Lewke and even the defence secretary had all gone "berserk" when accusations had been made against the STF. According to Hakeem if 1500 people (his estimate of the strength of the Pottuvil mob) say something they could not all be wrong! Remember Colombo in 1983 Mr. Hakeem? Were they right as they attacked the Tamils and in far greater numbers than 1500? Is he unaware that one can rent a mob at any time? This is in a country where you can hire any number of people to commit perjury and where parents get their children to lie to gain admission especially to Colombo schools.

What went wrong?

Since the arrival of the STF in 1984 the

people and many had sacrificed their lives for the people of Pottuvil. It was their battle too even though it was far away from their own homes, families and friends. They were tense and irked. Unfortunately they insensitively ordered the traders to open up their shops. That gave the opening for men of ill will to precipitate the events that followed. The mobs came out. The STF was made the target of the people's grief, anger and frustration. An unarmed STF admin convoy of leave personnel was attacked. As Hakeem ironically says "truth had become the first casualty". It was a psychological victory for the LTTE, gift wrapped by the Pottuvil mafia. Good people everywhere felt the pain of the STF.

STF in Pottuvil

The STF had in over 20 years created an enviable image as a fearless, bold, effective and straight unit. It is very proud of its reputation gained by considerable sacrifice of the lives of its troops. It is an elite, highly trained and disciplined, cohesive and effective unit with a strong law and order enforcing capability which has proved itself formidably in counter terrorist operations. The LTTE has suffered many a bloody nose at its hands and would love to see the back of the STF and not only in Pottuvil. Hakeem who appears to be delirious or hysterical has come out with suggestions that continue to flow non-stop. He says he has no objection to the STF's combat role, but does not want the STF to prevent the illicit timber trade

Hakeem must know. It uses its finances to buy support. Some people of Pottuvil like others elsewhere have obviously fallen treacherously into this trap.

Tsunami, Hakeem and STF

During the immediate aftermath and post-tsunami recovery phase the STF's image was further burnished not only by the locals but also the foreign aid workers who described the STF as brilliant in all what it did to help, guide and for a time even to sustain the affected. Even the LTTE acknowledged the STF's post-tsunami role. Hakeem went much further though restricted by his narrow but lucrative horizons. He told Hqi Saman Gooneratne that if he ever contested the Pottuvil seat, Gooneratne would get Hakeem's vote! After the last presidential election the same Hakeem was rescued from an angry crowd by the same Gooneratne (still in the STF) who actually carried the politician bodily to safety. Hakeem now has unfortunately had to forego STF protection and is visited by nightmares. By a twisted quirk in his character it is this Gooneratne that Hakeem now wants out of Pottuvil. One thing is sure, Hakeem has nothing to fear from the LTTE especially in Colombo as everyone even the fire brigade knows.

LTTE supports mob in Pottuvil

It is of interest to know the players responsible for creating unrest in Pottuvil from September 19-21. The LTTE website

Remembering an...

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The making of the linguist

Reading what others have written about his interest in linguistics, I recall that when we first stepped out of our village to the neighbouring village we were confronted with a totally different experience of the presence of different Sinhala dialects in our very neighbourhood. At Karandeniya, just few metres away from the borders of our village, a different dialect with an elongated nasal accent was spoken, whereas in my village, the influence of Tamil/Malayali (See Dr. M. H. Peter Silva) and Portuguese influence was quite marked.

Then we met others from other places in the Wellabada Pattu speaking different dialects in places like Induruwa. Places like Kosgoda and Balapitiya had their own version of elongated speech also with little spice in front in addressing people or situations, with such forms like *hukaa... bole*. The form of address *bole* transformed into *bele* in Induruwa.

Both Sugathe and I, unexposed to such expressions and ways of speaking the language at the time (we were not even in our early teens then) were intrigued by these forms and often talked about it. Did this early experience create an impression in him that the Sinhala language needed to be studied as it was spoken? I think it did. As for me, I have not given up interest in these different dialects as my review of K. B. Manawa's book on the dialects of the Vanni should show.

UNESCO

In 1980 when Mr. Pochpadas, Director of UNESCO's Cultural Heritage Division sent Programme Specialist, Prof. Kono to see me asking for my recommendation of a person to undertake a study project on the Maldives, I immediately recommended my old friend Sugathe as the most qualified person I knew and the ideal man for the job. I knew that he had been working on the Maldivian language at the time. UNESCO was very pleased with this recommendation and the project took Sugathe to the Maldives several times but I was shocked when Dr. Kono phoned me one day to say that my friend was no more and their good project was orphaned!

What more testimony does one want of him as a "guru" and friend than when eminent scholars of this land are still venerating him twenty five years after his untimely death?

Prof. Sugathapala de Silva was perhaps the first product of the Kannangara education reforms. The former minister's vision of giving talented village boys and girls a place under the sun was vindicated with the coming into prominence of persons like Sugathapala de Silva.

During my visit to my village in June for the funeral of my uncle I visited the neighbourhood of the place where Sugathe lived. I was sad to find that this *gangoda*, Galpottawaela, had degraded to unbelievable poverty. It was once a flourishing hamlet with its paddy *yaya* filled with ripening ears of Samba rice fed on both sides of the stream which led it with water. I remem-

bered how Sugathe and I washed our feet in the crystal clear water in front of his uncle's well-stocked shop. The stream is bone dry today. The present generation does not even know that it was a running creek once. The paddy *yaya* is a mere barren land where even grass does not seem to grow. Not a bird, not a draught animal around. All a result of development or expansion of human settlements into the forest reservation where the stream was sourced.

The well-stocked old shop which was owned by Sugathe's maternal uncle is gone. In its place there are two ramshackle village boutiques with a few items like a few coconuts and a few pieces of dryfish pointing to the poor economic status of the neighbourhood. It is in a hut nearby that I found a family of three living on a Samurthi dole of Rs. 3000 a month with the former breadwinner, Kariyawasam Gonapinuwa Gamage Gunasena (79 years) lying on a mat, his old wife and 42-year-old mentally deranged daughter, wandering around. The object of my visit this time was to see this miserable family whose situation was twice highlighted by *The Island* in April this year. This is while the rest of the village is vibrating under the cinnamon boom! Even Abans and Singer shops have come up selling their washing machines.

I hope, as a minimum recognition for his scholar, the Samurthi Ministry will help the miserable family in his former habitat and the "Gama Neguma" programme of the government takes a look at this small hamlet of Galpottawaela in my village!

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If they are subjected to discrimination the fact is noted but no action is taken, which I believe is a wise policy. If, however, they are subjected to physical violence and want help, I could be certain that help would be forthcoming from one or more Muslim countries. That certainly would be a practical expression of the spirit of the ummah.

My second example is the strange one of former Foreign Minister A. C. S. Hameed being ostracised by the entirety of the Islamic world. In 1981 and 1982, before I went abroad, it was a recurrent subject in lunch-time conversations in the Foreign Ministry that while Hameed travelled incessantly, he never went to the Islamic countries. Obviously he was not being invited, and he was certainly reduced to soliciting invitations. I myself was approached by a third party to sound out the Indonesian Ambassador about a possible invitation. I did not oblige, of course. Later, when I met the Malaysian Ambassador in Moscow in 1995, he observed that Hameed liked to travel and went on to ask, "Do you know that he used to actually solicit invitations?"

I will not examine the possible reasons for the ostracism. What is important is to recognise that the entirety of the governments of the Islamic world believed that Hameed ought to be ostracised, and that they could come together to do so. It bears impressive testimony to the possible power of the ummah in practical

terms.

My argument is that the notion of the ummah does create the sense of a religious bond that resonates in the deep psyche of the Muslims, and it could have practical consequences. But I must stress that it does not necessarily lead to extraterritorial political allegiances. Such allegiances, considering particularly the divisions in the Islamic world, must surely depend on various circumstances.

An analogy drawn by B de S helps substantiate that last point. He sees an analogy between the links implied by the ummah and the links between the SL Tamils and the ones in Tamil Nadu. Actually the contrasts are far more striking. The two groups of Tamils share the same race, language, culture, and religious composition. As for the SL Moors only a few families can claim Arab descent, while most are almost certainly of South Indian provenance just like the Tamils and the Sinhalese. The SL Moors speak no Arabic, and their cultural practises are more South Indian than Arab. They share with the Arabs only the religious bond, but that as I have shown above can be problematic. Furthermore there is the geographical contiguity between the two groups of Tamils, and a State in Tamil Nadu which can give political backing to the SL Tamils. The contrasts between the extraterritorial links of the SL Tamils and the SL Muslims are many and important. The analogy does not hold.