

by Michael Roberts

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At this point, early in October, the Sri Lankan Navy apprehended an LTTE boat making its way to India with 17 Tigers, including two senior commanders Kumarappa and Pulendran. As a political tug-a-war took place between the GoSL, the Indian powerbrokers in the island and the Tiger spokesmen, the simmering LTTE intentions of continuing their war of liberation came to the boil. The seventeen followed the leader's command and swallowed cyanide pills that had been smuggled in by Anton Balasingham and Mahathaya during the course of a prison visit. This, then, became the *casus belli* and the final device to convince the Tamil people — its people in the LTTE conception — that the IPKF must be resisted.

Implications

The setting that I have traced above is pertinent to the embellishments in Tamil *Tigress*, notably the use of Thileepan's photograph with Muralie beside him — both prominently highlighted in the book as the Tiger officers who enlisted Niromi (*Tigress*, 66-69), while Muralie was the platoon leader during her first experience of battle. These touches in turn provide a possible explanation for the reasons that induced de Soyza to obscure the fact that this fire-fight was against the IPKF. The alleged autobiography was finalized in 2010/11 in a context where the Western media has targeted Sri Lanka as an Ogre guilty of war crimes. To place Indian troops behind the guns that threatened her platoon would tarnish her goals.

These goals include an explicit desire to show Australians that the boat people who had begun to arrive off the coast of their continent were not economic refugees, but worthy asylum seekers fleeing persecution. She told Throsby that her tale was in line with the revelations provided by the Channel Four documentary *Killing Fields* and the Moon Panel of Experts. "I knew that when the Tamil Tigers were caught by the soldiers those things would happen they would be shot in the head, raped, tortured all of those things...It was nothing new." To complicate this propaganda pitch by placing the IPKF in the first chapter would spoil her intent.

While the government of Sri Lanka and its armies are her principal demon, de Soyza does not whitewash the LTTE. In line with the picture presented by the Panel of so-called "experts" commissioned by Ban Ki-Moon and *The Cage* by Gordon Weiss, some strictures are directed at the Tigers in both her final chapter "Afterwards" and her media interviews. As with Weiss's line of attack, however, these criticisms are wholly overshadowed by the weight of condemnation directed at Sri Lankan state and society.

Thus, the concluding pages are straight out of the propaganda package drafted by the Global Tamil Forum that has become part of the hardened beliefs of a whole spectrum of migrant Tamils in their condition of emotional turmoil

and desire for retribution. Some statements, such as the note that "journalists and politicians — both Sinhala and Tamil—have become victims of government thuggery," carry some validity; but others are misleading. For someone in late 2010 or early 2011 to state that "some 100,000 Tamils displaced by the war ... were held against their will in behind concentration camps where they endure primitive conditions" (*Tigress*, 303) and to assert that "Sri Lanka remains a very dangerous place not only for Tamils but for anyone who openly criticises the government's anti-democratic stance" (*Tigress*, 303) is a combination of malicious slander and exaggeration.

Similar criticisms were voiced in her chat with Throsby. Sri Lanka today is a place permeated by "silence" because "there is no free speech" and "the Tamils are continuously oppressed." Such opinions are no doubt firmly held in several Tamil quarters in Australia and elsewhere. The work of the Tamil spokespersons worldwide has also convinced many educated persons in the West — to the point where Margaret Throsby tells her listeners that during the last stages of the war in 2009



IPKF Troops during the final withdrawal from the Island

Forbidden Fruits? Niromi de Soyza, Noumi Kouri and Helen Demidenko?

"40,000 civilians might have been massacred."

Perhaps it is too much to expect Western media persons to seek more solid empirical information by consulting Tamil personnel in Australia and Sri Lanka with some knowledge of conditions in Sri Lanka as they have moved over time. My brief visit to Vavuniya and Jaffna in June 2010 was an eye-opener. The welfare work undertaken by such NGOs as SEED, Sewalanka, Caritas, *et cetera* in both the IDP camps and the northern reaches should be a lesson in humility for those, like me, who live by pen rather than deed. If only people like Margaret Throsby and Philip Adams would consult such persons as Singham, Annet Royce, Thamillagan and Kesavan (all Tamils by the way) out there delivering aid in the countryside in the north-east, rather than relying on NGOs cloistered in Colombo or embittered migrant spokespersons for their "facts," Sri Lanka could move forward. They would, for instance, find that Niromi de Soyza's picture of the IDP camps was largely a figment of the imagination. Those outsiders with honest intent are well advised to read Rajasingham Narendran's overview of the Tamil IDPs based on interviews and visits among them when they were in transit at the rear of the battlefield in early 2009 and

subsequently after unmonitored visits to some camps in the middle of that year.

As it happens, I have received an unsolicited note from a Lankan Australian who has just returned from aid work he has been directing in Mannar District. Jeremy Liyanage's report was succinct: we "ran five focus groups — four with Tamils and one with Muslims, all in Mannar. The story is now consistent over three separate periods of interviews over the past 12 months, that people are conflict saturated, that they don't want the Tamil diaspora to speak on their behalf, that the Eelam project is a failed project, and that they want a united single Sri Lanka but with conditions (equality of opportunity and outcome)." This concise assessment, I stress, is for one district and should not be blindly extended to the Tamil people in other localities. It is nevertheless a suggestive pointer for the northern regions in general.

Trivial Errors? Ethnographic Howlers of Profound Import?

While it was the foundational error in describing the context of her first battle experience that raised questions in my mind about the authenticity of de Soyza's autobiography, there are other tell-tale signs that added to these doubts — as I have remarked in my initial essay on this topic. These were minutiae. Again, a range of minute points of error

are listed by Arun Ambalavanar when he recently made the suggestion that Tamil *Tigress* was a "farce."

From recent email exchanges I gather that personnel in publishing circles in Australia treat such details as silly attention to trivia. The support for *Tamil Tigress* by such gentlemen as Gordon Weiss would seem to have been adequate ground for them to dismiss Ambalavanar's questions as ill-founded. Such evaluations say a great deal about the mentality and background knowledge of Australian publishing houses. As such, one has a tangential issue that is also worth reflecting upon.

Australian publishers, and Allen and Unwin in particular, would do well to remember how Random House rejected the Jordanian protests initially — till they learned the hard way. Like the Jordanians, Ambalavanar represents an indigenous Jaffna Tamil voice. True, there is some nit-picking within his array of doubts. However, it is the cumulative implications of such "trivia" that weigh heavily against Niromi de Soyza.

Some of the questions from Ambalavanar which the publishers may regard as trivial objections have the character of "ethnographic queries" in an anthropological sense. Ambalavanar is not only a native, but a Tamil poet. He distils his allegations neatly when he says that the narrative in *Tami*

Tigress bears a fake "accent." When Ambalavanar tells us that the Tamil equivalents of such terms as "mother-friend..." "fu.." and "boy friend" were not widely used in 1980s Jaffna, yet feature several times in *Tamil Tigress*, anyone with a nose for context should have paid attention to his claims.

Even though de Soyza's main political pitch is directed against the Sri Lankan government, Tamils who are guided by their "Tamil-ness" as well as those who are Tamil-Tiger in ideology should be cautious about mounting her bandwagon. They could ask the question: "how would talaivar Pirapaaharan have responded to her book?" They should then link this to a second question: "would Niromi de Soyza have written such a book if he was still alive?"

That second question would be akin to the placement of a panther in de Soyza's bedroom. Her tale has Pirapaaharan visiting her training camp at one point and the great leader tasking her with the job of purchasing female Tiger clothes from a secure house at another point. Pirapaaharan alive would obviously be quick to differentiate tall tale from fact. Pirapaaharan alive would also react ruthlessly against any Tamil who smeared the gravity of the Tamil movement for independence with tall tales.

Concluding Remarks

Though I have not reached a definitive verdict on the issue of fabrication, my leanings are strongly in that direction. Niromi de Soyza's answer to any such charge is within easy reach. There is no earthly reason why she cannot reveal her identity. Her assertion in interviews that "her personal safety" would be endangered is just so much nonsense, a massive conceit. Where Australians buy this argument, they only reveal their simple-minded thinking and the degree of indoctrination they have absorbed from the propaganda juggernaut of Tiger International.

For one, both Tamil *Tigress* and *The Cage* are on sale in Sri Lanka. For another there is no reason why the government of Sri Lanka would target an ordinary Tiger soldier from way back in time when they had detained around 11,500 Tigers in their high security centres in mid-2009 and have since released about 8,500 after what they term "rehabilitation, whatever that means. Again, the likelihood of some Sinhala Australian chauvinist intimidating de Soyza through phone calls is remote and should hardly be intolerable for a committed Tamil nationalist. If Noel Nadesan could withstand these forms of intimidation from ardent Tiger supporters in Melbourne for 13 years because his moderate stance and his editions of *Uthayam* angered them, there is no reason for this lady to hide behind anonymity.

In any event there is a second alternative. All de Soyza has to do is to release the real names of Ajanthi and Muralie, both long dead (and thus reborn). Those with access to the lists of Tiger maaveerar (heroes, 'martyrs') and their dates of death would tell us whether they existed in body and plane. Niromi de Soyza would then be vindicated.

(Concluded)

By ANNE-ELISABETH MOUTET, PARIS

As a shrewd student of political history and keen judge of the French pulse, he will probably consider the current accusations against him as merely light skirmishes, writes Anne-Elisabeth Moutet

It was a first for a French president: an apology, gracefully expressed, in front of the Cabinet, the Speakers of the House and Senate, and a roomful of French officials.

France, said Nicolas Sarkozy, had far too long supported authoritarian regimes that had very little to do with her core values. He himself had been "part of this". But no longer. The time had come to make morally exemplary choices.

This was Dr Jekyll-Sarkozy at his best, commenting on French foreign policy in the light of Gaddafi's fall for his traditional annual conference with French ambassadors from around the world. (The French don't apologise. Like the ancient Romans, they think owning up to a mistake is a fatal admission of weakness)

But don't expect this new, fresh approach to be extended to domestic politics, and especially to the skein of old scandals rising up this past week to encumber Mr Sarkozy as he prepares for the eight-month trek to the 2012 Presidential contest.

The two-year-old affaire Bettencourt has come to haunt him and his party again, with fresh allegations of illegal financing of his 2007 campaign by the L'Oréal heiress.

There have also been claims of Secret Service wiretaps on the mobile phones of a Le Monde investigative reporter and the co-author of a new book titled *Sarko*

Sarkozy's France: wiretaps, brown envelopes - and never any regrets

Killed Me.

The book is compiled of interviews with 27 personalities — ex-ministers, civil servants, television presenters, MPs, a number of journalists — who claim presidential displeasure cost them their career, reputation, or simply the favour they once enjoyed at the Elysée.

Prominent among them is an investigating magistrate, Isabelle Prévost-Desprez, who was removed from the Bettencourt case.

She tells of accusations, from two witnesses, that Liliane Bettencourt once gave Nicolas Sarkozy cash in a brown paper envelope — but says those were relayed outside of a formal interrogation, and therefore she did not include them in the record of her own official inquiry. (The one named witness, a former nurse working for Mrs Bettencourt, denied all yesterday.)

The general feeling in Paris is that Ms Prévost-Desprez claims raise more questions than they answer.

"Why then did she not re-interrogate her witnesses?" asked budget minister Valérie Pécresse: It's a valid question, given that investigating magistrates have notoriously extended powers in France — Eva Joly, who made her name in the 1980s and 1990s as a tough investigating judge in corporate corruption cases, did not hesi-



Sarkozy's game plan for 2012, in other words, was never to refashion himself as the country's ideal son-in-law, but as the safest pair of hands in difficult times...

tate send witnesses to jail to "soften them up", including the chairman of oil giant Elf.

The claims of Secret Service wiretaps, however, may be more of a problem.

The Interior Minister, Claude Guéant, a close Sarkozy associate and former Elysée chief of staff, was quick to answer

that nobody's telephone was actually eavesdropped, but admitted that security services requested records of calls to the Le Monde journalist, Gérard Davet, in order to seek the source of a Ministry of Justice whistleblower who'd leaked records on the Bettencourt case. The whistleblower, who was demoted

and sent to an obscure civil service posting in Cayenne, French Guiana, isn't protected by law, but journalistic sources are, in deference to a recent 2007 law passed by ... Nicolas Sarkozy.

Overall, it doesn't yet look as if the current accusations have yet reached the danger stage for the French president.

They will, however, form part of the Opposition general counter-attack after Nicolas Sarkozy's unexpected run of luck in the past few months.

His good fortunes include not just France's role in the Libyan victory, and the baby son his wife Carla Bruni is expecting in October, but also the disappearance of his toughest rival, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, after his arrest on suspicion of suspicion of sexually assaulting a New York chambermaid.

A deeply polarising figure, Sarkozy was never elected because the French liked him.

Soon nicknamed the "bling-bling president" for his love of Rolex watches, Ray-Ban aviator sun-specs, thick cigars, holidays on friendly tycoons' yachts, and trophy wives, he was seen as the "President of the rich" after a very first budget that limited to 50p the top tax rate.

It didn't help either to be nicknamed "the American" for his eagerness to rejoin Nato, his considered support for presidents Bush and Obama, even his habit to jog in a NYPD tee-shirt given him by Rudy Giuliani.

The French prefer their leaders, from Louis XIV to de Gaulle, to stay icily aloof: Sarkozy's populist manner, four-letter-word use, and short temper did him no favours.