

What is to be done?

by Carlo Fonseka

The article published in the *Sunday Observer* of August 13 by Professor Priyan Dias under the heading 'Re-organising our Polarization - Sinhala Responsibility Greater' evoked this response. I feel that his **first-class civil engineering brain** has grasped the essence of the **Sinhala-Tamil problem**, and he has articulated it with **admirable lucidity**.

Amelioration of the situation requires both empathising (i.e. understanding emotions) and systemising (i.e. building systems). Quoting my friend Prof Kumar David, another brilliant academic engineer, he indicates why even moderate Tamils will riot, disown the Tamil Tigers even when the Tigers are ruinously murdering their finest sons such as Neelan Thiruchelvam, Lakshman Kadirgamar, and Ketheesh Loganathan among many others. "The Tamil people," says Prof Kumar David, "will not settle accounts with the Tamil Tigers until they have first settled accounts with the Sinhala State".

Only solution

Safe haven I can and do empathise with my many Tamil friends and former loving Tamil pupils. For the Tigers, red in tooth and claw, the only solution to the Sinhala-Tamil problem appears to be a separate state called Tamil Eelam with Mr. V. Prabhakaran as absolute monarch. But even moderate Tamils who surely would not wish to be ruled by him must feel the imperative need for a safe haven to retreat to. From whom? From those Sinhalese who cannot help feeling in the marrow of their bones the sentiment implied in the song *Mey Sinhala apage ratai* (this is the land of the Sinhalese people).

Who can tell when they will next feel impelled (as happened in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1979, 1981, and on a massive scale in 1983) to loot, beat up, harass, murder and even burn alive, those who cannot recite the *gatha* taught by the Compassionate Buddha which begins with the words *ihi piso bagawa* with an accent like that of a member of Parliament of the JHU.

Politically naive

What is to be done? In the very title of his article, Prof. Priyan Dias says that the Sinhala people have the greater responsibility to solve the problem because it is they who do not want a divided Sri Lanka. "If that be the case" declares Prof. Priyan Dias, "the Sinhalese must bend over backwards to accommodate anything that is at all possible to make Tamils feel that they are secure and full citizens in Sri Lanka".

Well said. The question is: What is to be done? As it happens, that question is the title of a book that the professional revolutionary V. I. Lenin published in 1902. Before writing it, he had thought things

through thoroughly. For me, confronting the question as a medic treading a field mined with traps for the politically naive, I lack all conviction about what is to be done at this point to heal the mortally wounded Sinhala-Tamil relations. Only the worst in our world of politics seem to be "full of passionate intensity" about the final solution (bomb the hell out of the Tigers and damn devolution).

Impromptu solution On the 3rd of June this year, the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs organised a seminar on conflict resolution to which I was one of the invitees. The seminar was conducted by two South African experts on conflict resolution, Mr. Roelf Meyer and Mr. Ibrahim, erstwhile political enemies, but now members of the South African state.

During question time, Mr. Meyer solicited the opinions of the participants about possible solutions to our current conflict. There were political scientists, politicians, constitutional lawyers, journalists, and so on, but nobody ventured an opinion. I felt embarrassed by the deafening silence and off the top of my head proffered an opinion. I will recount here, to the best of my recollection, what I said on that occasion and I invite Prof. Priyan to react to it. This is what I said.

Productive lives

"I speak only because our opinions were solicited and nobody else more qualified than I is saying a thing.

I am an old retired medic and so my approach is going to be clinical rather than political. In medicine, we know of many diseases which cannot be cured. Examples are most cases of hypertension, diabetes mellitus, bronchial asthma and epilepsy.

However, medical science knows how to manage people afflicted by these disorders satisfactorily to enable them to lead productive lives. In like manner, it seems to me that in the present stage of human evolution, ethnic conflicts are basically incurable social disorders. We have to learn to live with them.

History shows that there are ways and means of minimizing the damage and trauma accruing from such conflicts. One thing seems to be quite clear. And that is that there are no quick satisfactory solutions to hand. Quick fixes by their very nature, cannot and will not work for long.

Remember that the conflict in South Africa took over a century to resolve. (At that point by sign lan-

guage, Mr. Meyer indicated that it had taken three centuries). The conflicts in Northern Ireland, Kashmir and Palestine pre-date our conflict and still remain unresolved. It seems to me that our ethnic problem, which has lasted only half a century, is not ripe enough for final resolution.

Analogy On the basis of a medical analogy, I think we should approach the resolution of our problem in two stages. Let me explain what I mean. Consider a 50-year old man who has met with a nasty road traffic accident, which has fractured his left thigh bone in two and produced a ghastly wound in his thigh.

Blood transfusion

The definitive treatment for this condition is to fix the thigh bone by the insertion of a pin. This requires major surgery. But if the surgery is attempted straight away the man will probably not survive the operation.

As a result of the accident, the person would have lost a great deal of blood and therefore he would be in a state of circulatory shock. So the first step is to stabilise his general physical condition by blood transfusions and so on, and to clean up and dress the wound. In the next stage, after several days or weeks, the bone in his thigh can be fixed by surgery.

Two stages On this model, the Sinhala-Tamil conflict will have to be resolved in two stages. In the first stage, the Tamils of Sri Lanka who have inhabited mainly the northern part of this country for centuries, and have preserved a language, religion and culture of which they are proud, should be recognised as a separate nation living in this country. Given the fact that the balance of political forces in our Parliament does not enable a radical amendment to the constitution, the next best thing to do would be to implement fully and honestly, the 13th Amendment (Provincial Council system). In addition, free interaction between Sinhalese and Tamils from the North should be actively promoted by cultural, social and sports events.

In the second stage, steps will have to be taken to recognise the right of the Tamil nation to govern itself by a substantial devolution of power. Some form of federalism is acceptable to me and there is reason to believe that it is only a politically half-miseducated and misguided minority who find it objectionable.

However, in all honesty, I should sound a note of warning. Mr. Prabhakaran appears to be unswervingly committed to his vision of an independent Tamil Eelam and seems to be hellbent on fighting for it to the death. So he must be made to meet his death by accident, suicide or murder.

There should be no devolution of power during his lifetime because he will surely use it as the launching pad for the final step to the fulfilment of his vision of a Tamil Eelam in which he is absolute monarch.