

## OPINION

# J.R., Mahinda and the presidential elections ...

## UK regrets Sri Lanka arms sales

THE export of UK arms to Sri Lanka during the ceasefire periods, 2002 to 2007, was 'regrettable' says cross-party committee on arms export controls, in a report published by the House of Commons.

Calling Sri Lanka a place 'contrary to UK policy', the report states in January 2010, the Minister of State for the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) admitted that the government had been 'concerned' about the Sri Lankan situation for 'quite a long period of time' and, as such, had been 'very cautious' regarding arms export.

The committee also wrote of their 'grave concerns' around human rights in the final stages of the Sri Lankan offensive against the LTTE, where the UN estimates up to 20,000 Tamil civilians were killed.

The Sri Lankan army's use of British weapons against Tamil civilians was exposed in August last year by several UK media sources, including The Times newspaper, The Telegraph newspaper and Channel 4 news.

The sale of UK arms occurred despite Britain being bound to the 1998 EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, which restricts the sale of arms to countries facing civil war or those with a poor human rights record, where there is a 'clear risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression.'

In 2002, Peter Hain, then Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister of State, expressed his 'unshakeable belief that Sri Lanka's ethnic problems cannot be resolved by military means' and went on to add, 'The cycle of violence, which has afflicted Sri Lanka for so long, must be broken if peace is to have any chance of taking root.'

During 2006 to 2008, Britain allegedly approved the sale of over £13.6 million of military equipment to Sri Lanka, including

thugs assaulted demonstrators, and police arrested the victims. Opponents of the government and lawyers who appeared for them were tortured and killed. The destruction of democracy by Jayewardene, continued by his successor, Ranasinghe Premadasa, spawned a Sinhalese insurrection in which about 60,000 people were killed. Will history repeat itself?

This time around, a referendum is not likely, but violent suppression of the opposition is underway to ensure that President Rajapakse's coalition gets a two-thirds majority in the parliamentary elections. The arrest and threatened court martial of Fonseka is part of this strategy. Meanwhile, the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission has approached Chinese military-intelligence specialists to help with blocking news websites and the Google search engine, indicating a further clamping-down on freedom of expression and the



armoured vehicles, machinegun components, grenades and semi-automatic pistols.

The global think tank, SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), wrote that the Sri Lankan government's acquisition of military equipment, maritime systems and imports of stock ammunitions in particular, encouraged the government to opt for a military solution to the country's political problems, leading to 'one of the bloodiest conflicts of 2008'.

The report concluded by welcoming the subsequent revocation of nine existing licenses during July and August 2009 and recommended that the government review the 'efficacy of the criteria' used in scrutinising the export of arms.

Excerpts of the report follow: "In our last Report, following the escalation of hostilities in Sri Lanka, we examined licences for arms exports to that country. In April 2009, Bill Rammell MP,

right to information. If this repression continues to escalate, another bloodbath could well follow. But the president's opponents are aware of the danger. People have understood that if the foremost war hero can be dragged off and tried in a kangaroo court, no one is safe. This is why leading Buddhist clergy, among others, have come out demanding Fonseka's release, or at least a fair trial in a civilian court.

There is an incipient anti-fascist movement in Sri Lanka's civil society today, but it lacks cohesion and a principled leadership. Wickremesinghe is tainted by having been part of the Jayawardene and Premadasa regimes while they were committing atrocities against both Tamils and Sinhalese. The UNP cannot take the moral high ground unless Wickremesinghe is replaced, but no one knows who would be able to replace him. In addition, the left-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) needs to make a

then Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, told us that the FCO's judgment was that an embargo, or the threat of one, was not the best vehicle for trying to secure a ceasefire in Sri Lanka. The Minister told us that few licences had been granted for exports to Sri Lanka since the beginning of 2007 which he cited as evidence of procedures being effective."

"He added that: "due to the lack of access and information surrounding the final stages of the conflict collection information on how helicopters were used in the conflict has been challenging" and that based on the information available "we can say the helicopters were used for medical evacuation, logistical support, re-supply and ad hoc search and rescue operations and to transport VIPs including foreign delegations up to the northern region. They were used to much lesser extent moving troops themselves to forward areas [...]."

critique of its own past totalitarianism and anti-Tamil bias; while the TNA, which has already distanced itself from the LTTE demand for Tamil Eelam, needs to condemn the LTTE's authoritarianism, its killings of Sinhalese and Muslim civilians and ethnic cleansing of northern Muslims. Above all, genuine leftists need to take an independent and principled stand against the fascist transformation of the state that is underway, with all forms of dissent, including trade-union struggles, progressively being eliminated, and dissidents threatened with death. Today, they need to work to provide a moral compass, pointing towards democracy and social justice.

*This article written by Rohini Hensman an independent scholar, writer and activist based in India and Sri Lanka appeared in the March 2010 issue of "Himal South Asia" magazine that has not been allowed into the Country so far by the Sri Lankan Customs.*

*Continued from p12*

been undermined drastically by the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and Emergency Regulations, which provided impunity for state crimes. None of these grievances was addressed after the end of the war, making it clear that this was an essential part of President Rajapakse's rule.

The sense of desperation generated by this situation was expressed by one Sinhalese citizen who referred to the Rajapakse brothers as "monsters", and another who said, "When you're in a frying pan you have to jump, even if you risk landing in the fire!" to explain why she was voting for Fonseka. The eloquent reply by another, one Anura Gunasekara, as published on the Transcurrents website on 8 February, commenting on Rajapakse's allegation that those who voted against him "betrayed the country", is worth quoting at length:

Now I, along with 4.17 million other citizens, am being compelled to accept that a personal choice in the exercise of the franchise is an act of treachery against my country. As a citizen I need to consider this statement seriously and with trepidation; to me it seems to carry with it an ominous echo of approaching fascism, a suppression of civil liberties and a denial of a citizen's fundamental right ... I decided to take a risk with the unknown and unlovable Fonseka, in the hope that a change would bring about ... order in to what is fast becoming a lawless society; that marauding parliamentarians would at last be as equally subject to legal restriction, as any Citizen Perera; that public and private corruption would be minimized or curtailed to an extent that it is no longer a suppurating sore on the body public; that journalists who voice a dissenting point of view could ply their trade without incurring the risk of armed attack, abduction and even loss of life; that unaligned news broadcasters could function without fear of being shut down for disseminating unpalatable truths; that the unconscionable expenditure of public funds on the aggrandizement of the politically powerful could be halted; that the minorities of this country who have suffered loss of life, livelihood, shelter, education and the opportunity of participation in mainstream national activity, would at last be given equal

opportunities along with the majority. I sincerely believe that some, if not all of these issues, would have been in the minds of many of those who voted for Fonseka.

The election revealed the illusory character of the orchestrated triumphalism and supposedly monolithic Sinhalese support for Rajapakse that had been propagated after the end of the war. It also exposed a much deeper fissure in Sri Lankan society than the so-called ethnic divide: one between those who benefit from or can live with a totalitarian state, and those committed to democracy. Given that many of the latter, both Sinhalese and minorities, felt that Fonseka was not a credible candidate and therefore did not vote at all, we can conclude that they are in fact the majority.

### Rajapakse or Jayewardene?

Soon after the election, Fonseka was dragged out of an opposition meeting by military police and threatened with a court martial and possible death sentence. The charges against him were vague and kept changing. The most frequently voiced was that he was planning a military coup, although anyone with common sense might ask why he would leave the military and contest an election if he was planning a military coup. Hundreds of his supporters, both within the military and civilians, were victimised. Demonstrators calling for Fonseka's release were physically assaulted by government thugs, and the police sided with the attackers. Fonseka's lawyer was threatened with death.

At this point, the sense of déjà vu becomes overwhelming. Before the presidential election of 1982, J R Jayewardene clamped down on media freedom and used state resources in his campaign. As has taken place in recent weeks, trade unionists were victimised and assaulted. The PTA and Emergency Regulations undermined the rule of law, providing impunity for state crimes. After the election, popular opposition politician Vijaya Kumaratunga (husband of former president Chandrika Kumaratunga) was detained on cooked-up charges. A rigged referendum resulted in the cancellation of parliamentary elections. State-sponsored