

A History of Violence

The Tamil Tigers are gone,
but ethnic struggle remains

NACHAMMAI RAMAN

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were a fearsome force that controlled a third of Sri Lanka at their peak. They ran a de facto state with their own air force, navy, and infantry. In their final days, they collapsed like a pack of cards after holding out for twenty-six years. The Tamil Tigers may be finished, but the ethnic conflict that created them has yet to be resolved.

The roots of Sri Lanka's problems go back to the British colonization of the island in 1796. Sri Lankan Tamils had already been living in the north and east for centuries. With the arrival of the British, more Tamils were brought from the Indian mainland as indentured labourers to work on tea plantations in Sri Lanka's central hill country.

By the time Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948, the Sinhalese population, although a majority, was feeling threatened by the disproportionate presence of Tamils in their government services and their economic staple, tea-growing. Independence coincided with a spurt of nationalism among the Sinhalese, who in turning back to their Buddhist roots and Sinhala language, sidelined the Tamils, who speak their own Tamil language and are predominantly Hindu with sizeable Christian and Muslim minorities.

Three actions contributed to the marginalization of the Tamils in Sri Lanka: the repatriation of Tamil tea plantation workers to India in 1949; the Sinhala Only Act passed in 1956, which drove Tamils from the civil service; and the 1963 policy to admit to universities Sinhalese students with lower marks than their Tamil counterparts.

The early struggle for Tamil rights was non-violent, but it had little effect on government policies. Besides the LTTE, an alphabet soup of militant groups sprang out of disaffected youth: TELO, TULF, EROS, PLOTE, etc. Along the way, these other groups either disbanded or went on to join the government. The Tamil Tigers themselves eliminated some that they perceived as rivals.



Civil War

In 1983, the Tigers attacked a military convoy in the north, killing thirteen Sinhalese soldiers. In retaliation, indiscriminate violence was unleashed against Tamils living in Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, in the Black July episode. This triggered the war that would span a quarter of a century. The then-Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, took an active interest in the fate of Sri Lankan Tamils after the July riots and offered training and support to the Tamil militants. She saw a strategic Indian interest in the ethnic conflict—staving off the Americans from flanking India in the north in Pakistan and in the south in Sri Lanka.

After her assassination in 1984, her son Rajiv Gandhi came to power. On his watch, in 1987, a peace accord was signed between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government; the Tigers would govern provincial councils in the north and east, and the Indian government would

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Impressionist Journalism

MICHAEL RYAN WISEMAN

I impersonated a journalist at two events of citizen-driven activism and the following is my impression of the proceedings as the mucous of apathy and cirrostrati of lassitude that quotidianly cataract my mind's eye were obliterated by the hot breath of tumult that rides alongside the voice of the people. You get the idea: people caring about their communities—sadly all-too novel a concept. Two approaches, two different means with, for now at least, the same ends.

The first event is a good old fashion rally-march-squat. An autonomous, community-run social centre is the prize. Let's go live to the scene. It's misty. It ain't warm. It ain't cold either. The drum is the first sign. The police car is the second. They gather in hundreds, milling, perhaps trying to come to terms with the inherent contradiction of an oft-stereotyped philosophy. What direction do we march? Who decides?

A piece of advice as you lament the fact that your movement is being pigeon-holed and summarily dismissed as 'just a bunch of anarchists' while you speak eloquently—and persuasively—of being so much more, of being a non-profit, communal, and alternative form of neighbourhood development that can replace the expensive, homogenous, and myopic form that currently prevails: remove the A that has broken-through its encompassing

circle from your flyers that outline your set of principles.

Flags. Bands. Medics. Medics? Prepared! Begin. Re-appropriate for the best, the greater good, the more the merrier. Strike up the band. Stilted. Tilted. Hauling. A U-Haul. They rented a U-Haul? I guess the system isn't always so bad. It stops at an intersection. The band plays Bella Ciao. The police direct traffic.

A non-descript, vacant warehouse on Saint Patrick Street. Break the lock; no pick, use bolt cutters. A lot of things. None of them subtle. Is it working? Not yet. Always practice at home first. A dry run would've helped—it's getting sticky. At last a breakthrough. Unload.

Saint Patrick, thou shalt not convert them. The snakes strike back. That was quick. But history doesn't judge you on getting it, it judges you on if you hold it—offence is the easy part. Dance for the victory. Careful, you're treading on eggshells so don't count your chickens just yet. The next day, the police forcibly removed them from the premises.

This wasn't a case of promised virtues falling prey to the passion of the moment, this day had been two years in the making. It wasn't supposed to end like this. They say it has only just begun.

The second event is a good old fashion talk-talk-talk. Thousands gather for the

5th Annual Montreal Citizens' Summit—a patchwork of community groups and concerned citizens cobble together declarations and policies over scores of presentations, seminars, and workshops. A stark contrast. Let's talk.

A couple dozen of us in a sterile, no frills classroom—the discussion isn't likewise uninspiring. At least it's underground. Quite literally—there are no windows. Three Montreal-based activists discuss community-organizing techniques.

We are told that there are two principles: 'resistance to' and 'building of'. It is never enough to be against something. You have to know what you are for. Metaphysical speculation and ontological philosophy aside, there are three keys to success.

The first is citizen action on the ground. From low to high visibility, from door-to-door awareness to street blockades. Get noticed. Get numbers. The second is timing—harness momentum, but be thoroughly prepared, meticulous. And the third—make contacts with the powerbase of the community and the establishment. Sometimes you need to make a ruckus and sometimes you need to submit a policy paper. They conclude that both are necessary, not least when, "We don't have the police hitting us on the head—we have a bureaucracy drowning us."

So, it's pick your poison. Just be glad, I guess, that we have the choice and that so many are willing—unlike your idle correspondent—to choose.

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send a peacekeeping force to ensure the security of the Tamil people while the Tigers disarmed. Never completely trusting the Sri Lankan government, the Tamil Tigers were loath to give up their arms. This led to tensions with the Indian Peace Keeping Force that escalated into a full-blown war.

In 1989, the newly elected Sri Lankan president, Ranasinghe Premadasa, thinking that the presence of a foreign army challenged Sri Lanka's sovereignty, clandestinely armed the Tigers to fight the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Facing mounting losses, Rajiv Gandhi called back his troops. The Indian intervention had, however, helped the Tamil Tigers to gain control of territory in the north and east that they one day wanted to make their independent homeland, Tamil Eelam.

The Assassination

If there was one act that would haunt the Tamil Tigers to the end, it was Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991; it got them banned in India, hitherto their backroom for arms supplies, training, and organization. India, whose army got Bangladesh its independence from Pakistan, has since refused to intervene directly in the conflict.

The Tamil Tigers in recent years have expressed regret for the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. Anton Balasingham, the LTTE's late spokesman, told an Indian television channel in 2006: "As far as that event is concerned, I would say it is a great tragedy, a monumental historical tragedy, which we deeply regret."

Before alienating India, the Tamil Tigers had embarked on another badly conceived action that would eventually weaken them. In 1990 they expelled

all the Muslims living in the north of the island over accusations of spying for the Sri Lankan government. The Muslims of Sri Lanka make up about 8-10 percent of the population. They speak Tamil. They traditionally lived in Tamil areas and fought alongside the Tamils for a homeland. In 2002, the Tamil Tigers apologized and invited them back, but the damage was done. The Muslims never trusted them again and have since formed their own political groups, pressing for their own set of rights.

Permanent Ceasefire

A permanent ceasefire, brokered by Norway in 2002, was signed between

the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The ceasefire was meant to be a first step in exploring a federal solution to the problem. However divisions within the ranks split the Tamil Tigers into two factions during the ceasefire. The Eastern leader, Karuna Amman, broke away with his followers to the government side, which resulted in the Tigers accusing the government of using the breakaway faction to wage a shadow war.

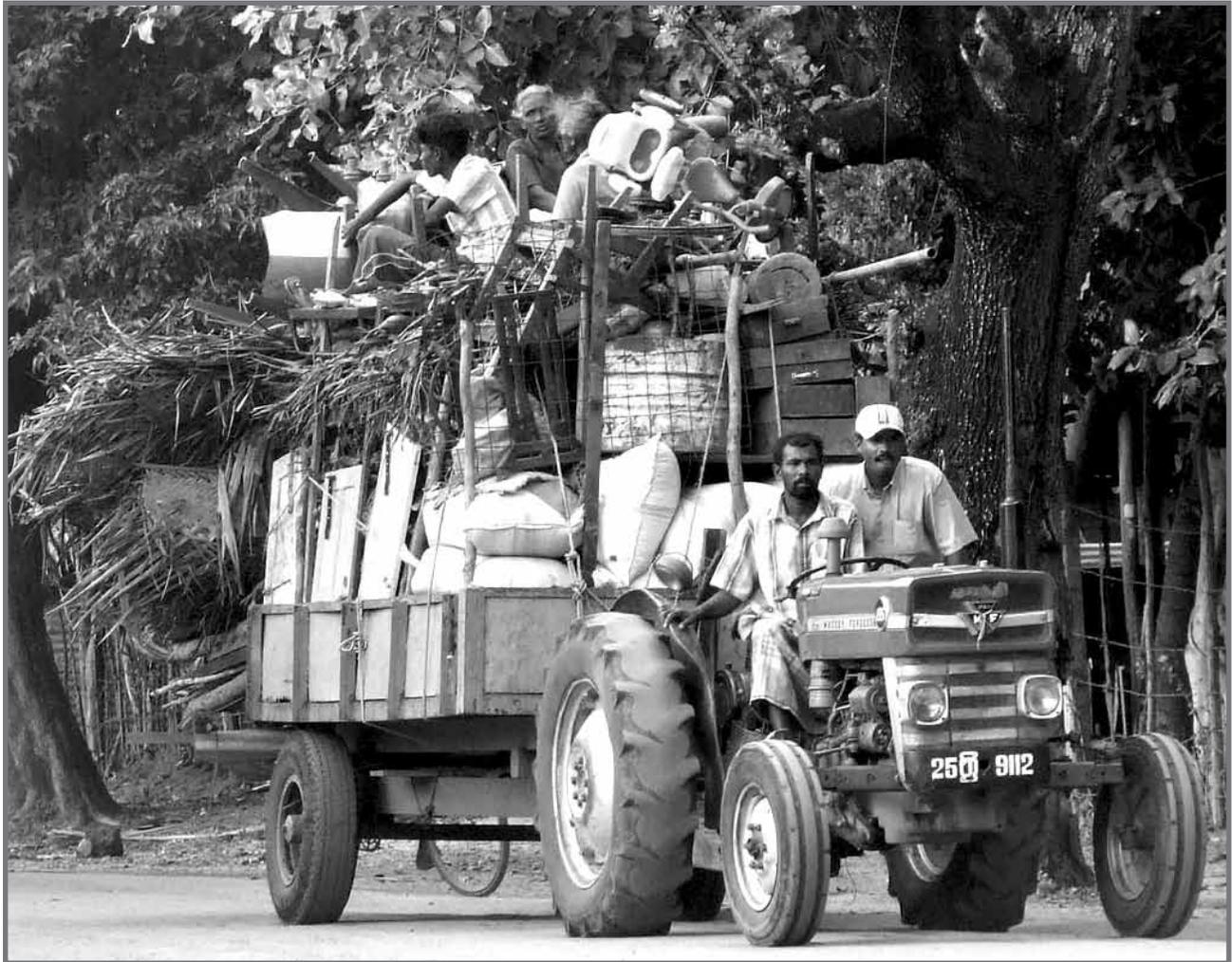
The Tamil Tigers also complained of a clause in the ceasefire agreement that gave the government, as a state party,

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Tamil Eelam going the way of El Dorado?

Photos: FLICKR/INDI SAMARAJIVA



In war, truth—and civilians—are the first casualties. Some factions of the LTTE maintain that rumours of their leader's death are greatly exaggerated, while the UN's conservative estimate for civilian deaths since January is 8,000.

the right to protect national security. As a non-state party, when the Tigers killed it was terrorism, but when the government killed, it was national security. In addition, September 11 2001 helped the Sri Lankan government to get the Tamil Tigers listed as a terrorist group in the European Union and Canada— their largest diaspora support bases.

A Hard Line

As a form of protest in the 2005 general elections, the Tamil Tigers forbade anyone living in their territory to vote. But for the boycott, almost all Tamils would have voted for Mahinda Rajapakse's more moderate opponent, Ranil Wickremasinghe. A more moderate president might have steered away from war.

Rajapakse took a hard line. While the Tigers used the Tamil diaspora to lobby— in vain— the Western nations that had banned them, Rajapakse cobbled together a formidable all-Eastern bloc: China and Russia provided weapons and diplomatic support on the Security Council; Iran, money; Pakistan, training. India has also been accused of providing covert support in what has been called a war without witnesses— journalists, and even international agencies, were not allowed into the war zone.

Though the military battle has been won, a war of words rages on. The Sri Lankan government boasts that it has wiped out terrorism, but the diaspora cry genocide. Surviving Sri Lankan civilians from the war zone

may offer some insight into what really happened, but they have remained silent thus far in tightly controlled government-run displacement camps.

Rajapakse's address to Sri Lankan parliament suggests that he wants to keep out foreign players in dealing with the Tamil issue, "We must find a home-grown solution to this conflict." But there are no indications from the government of any concrete plans in this regard. The leader of Sri Lanka's Tamil National Alliance party, MP Rajavarothiam Sampanthan, noted that Rajapakse's speech outlined "no vision [of] a political solution."

NACHAMMAI RAMAN is a freelance journalist.

Protests and the Global City

Taking it to the... highways

JUDY REBICK

Over the last months in Toronto and Montreal, we have experienced the global city as never before. The Tamil community, about 250,000 strong by some accounts, has been protesting almost continuously since early January to press the Canadian government to act to stop a slaughter of Tamil civilians in the last stages of the civil war in Sri Lanka.

During a life of activism, I have never seen more sustained street actions than we have witnessed in Toronto over the last months. More than half the Tamil community has been out in streets, first as a human chain that snaked along the sidewalks from downtown Union Station to uptown Bloor Street, then thousands in front of the Sri Lankan consulate, then another human chain even longer and bigger. Through all of this action, the only mainstream news coverage was about traffic problems.

So the Tamil community took it the next step and sat down in the street in front of the U.S. consulate for four days. What was amazing about the sit-in, besides the fact that the police allowed them to stay for four days as long as they permitted access for emergency vehicles, was the composition of the sit-in. While second generation youth led the protest, it was older women and children who seemed to form the core. I have never seen so many children involved in a protest, most of them understanding exactly why they were there. The protests have become so continuous that one leader of a local Tamil organization told me that they had become a major focus of social interaction especially for the youth.

The sit-in on University Avenue started to provoke a reaction but mostly it was disgruntled Torontonians complaining about being delayed on their way to work. I was shocked by the open racism



One-way traffic.

I heard when I appeared on a local TV call-in show to defend the protests. But still there was no response from politicians or the government.

Then on Sunday May 10 in a bold action, about two thousands Tamils climbed the on-ramp on to the Gardiner Expressway—one of the busiest highways in Toronto—and sat down blockading traffic for several hours. Reports of a massive slaughter of Tamil civilians had been coming out over the weekend. Frustrated at the silence of the federal government despite the largest demonstrations we have ever seen in this country, and desperate to save the lives of family and friends back home, a group of Tamil activists decided to lead a creative act of civil disobedience.

While drivers returning to the city from a weekend away were no doubt frustrated, finally the Tamil struggle was the lead story of every media outlet in the country. Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff agreed to raise the issue in Parliament and the Tamil peaceably, as they had been throughout all the protests, left the Gardiner Expressway and continued their protest in front of the US consulate—this time on the sidewalk.

There was a ferocious backlash to the occupation of the Gardiner but it got

action and mainstream interest in the issues. The Tamil community has been brilliant in its ability to mobilize but less effective in finding allies for their cause. It has taken a while for non-Tamil support to build because of the confusion about the role of the Tamil Tigers. The discourse of the War On Terror has allowed governments like ours to ignore massive slaughter of civilians by oppressive states in the name of fighting terrorism. Moreover the Tamil Tigers have committed atrocities. But whatever our concerns about the Tigers it is critical to separate the human rights issues from the political ones.

The reality of living in a global city has now been driven home to many Canadians. The importance of solidarity with communities living in our city is not only to defend human rights but also to ensure that diverse communities will be there with us in the battles to come in Canada. The Tamil community found out that their true allies are among the social movements and unions in the city— and those movements discovered a new world of activism right on their doorstep.

JUDY REBICK is a social justice activist, writer, broadcaster and speaker. She currently holds the Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy at Ryerson University.

The Economic Crisis and Obama's Response

Part 1 of 2

JAMES K. GALBRAITH

It is a relief to have a new Administration, to be at the start of a new government rather than at the end of one, and to have a President with the talent of President Obama and with the public confidence that he presently enjoys. That said, there is a real question as to whether this opportunity will be used in a way that makes for an effective course of action in the time during which the window of opportunity will be open.

There are serious questions about both the capability and the motives of the economic team that is presently in charge. But, for the purposes of argument, let us give them the benefit of the doubt while I describe what I believe to be their understanding of the situation and offer my critique of it. Then, in next month's issue, I shall propose some alternative prescriptions.

Their formula has been a combination of early action to stimulate the economy—a stimulus package, the Recovery Act, that was the first legislative achievement of the Administration—and a bank bailout whose stated objective is to get credit flowing again. In the Administration's view, or in the view of the economic team, these two measures are intended to work together to provide, on the one hand, some impetus toward activity to thwart the massive loss of jobs that the economy is experiencing and the consequences thereof, and on the other, to resurrect the banking system by cleansing its books of the so-called toxic assets. The latter measure is based on the theory that it is a kind of congestion or clogging of said books that is the principal reason why bank lending and borrowing has dried up so thoroughly.

With these two steps the Administration envisages—and its economic forecasts

reflect—an expectation of a fairly rapid return to normal, where normal is defined as the conditions, say, of the middle 1990s or the middle 2000s; i.e. an economy operating at a fairly high level of employment driven forward by an active financial sector extending credit and making possible profitable private enterprise.

If you assess the stimulus package as it was developed and enacted, the most obvious features of the situation all lead to the conclusion that it was smaller than it should have been and not as ambitious in its timeframe as it should have been.

In the first place, there were political constraints. In spite of the fact that the Administration came in with massive public support, that support did not extend to Congress; neither to complete control of the Senate, nor to the self-styled centrists within the Democratic Party (in both the House and the Senate) who remain deeply preoccupied with fiscal questions—that is to say with the size of deficits and public debt. In Congress, a trillion dollars is a very large number.

Second, there was the technical question of the economic forecasting within which the stimulus package was constructed. The economic forecasts, for example, of the Congressional Budget Office or the Office of Management and Budget are built around the presumption that the economy has certain normal values to which it will return in a reasonable period of time.

In the case of the CBO there is an expectation that an unemployment rate of 4.8 percent—the so-called natural rate—is the normal value and that the economy will get back there over a four- or five-year period, even if nothing

is done. That being so, estimates of the effect of a stimulus package are in the context of a recovery that will begin in the early part of next year whatever policy steps are taken.

That context—professional expectation—reduced the urgency associated with the stimulus package and made it very hard to argue for a package that should have been dramatically larger than the one that was enacted; the reality of the situation leaves us no reason to believe that the underlying forecast was correct.

There is also an expectation that the economy will recover—a certain short-term-ism—which caused the Administration to place an enormous emphasis on measures that could be put in place quickly. The buzz-phrase was "shovel-ready": projects that municipal and state governments were already planning to undertake but were being held up for lack of funding. The result was—and is—that measures that would rebuild the economy over the long run did not get high priority in the design of the recovery package; the underlying belief was that after two years things could be wrapped up.

Let us now turn to the banking question. It took a long time to get to the Geithner Plan—the program advanced by the Treasury Secretary in February/March, and now delayed, perhaps indefinitely—so we should ask what was it supposed to do? It is, obviously, a complicated structure involving the creation of public/private partnerships that would purchase banks' securities (i.e. the debt from the toxic assets of defaulted/defaulting mortgages) and remove them from the books of the banks, thereby permitting the banks to deleverage and recapitalize (i.e. reduce their debt-to-asset ratios and increase their liquidity.)

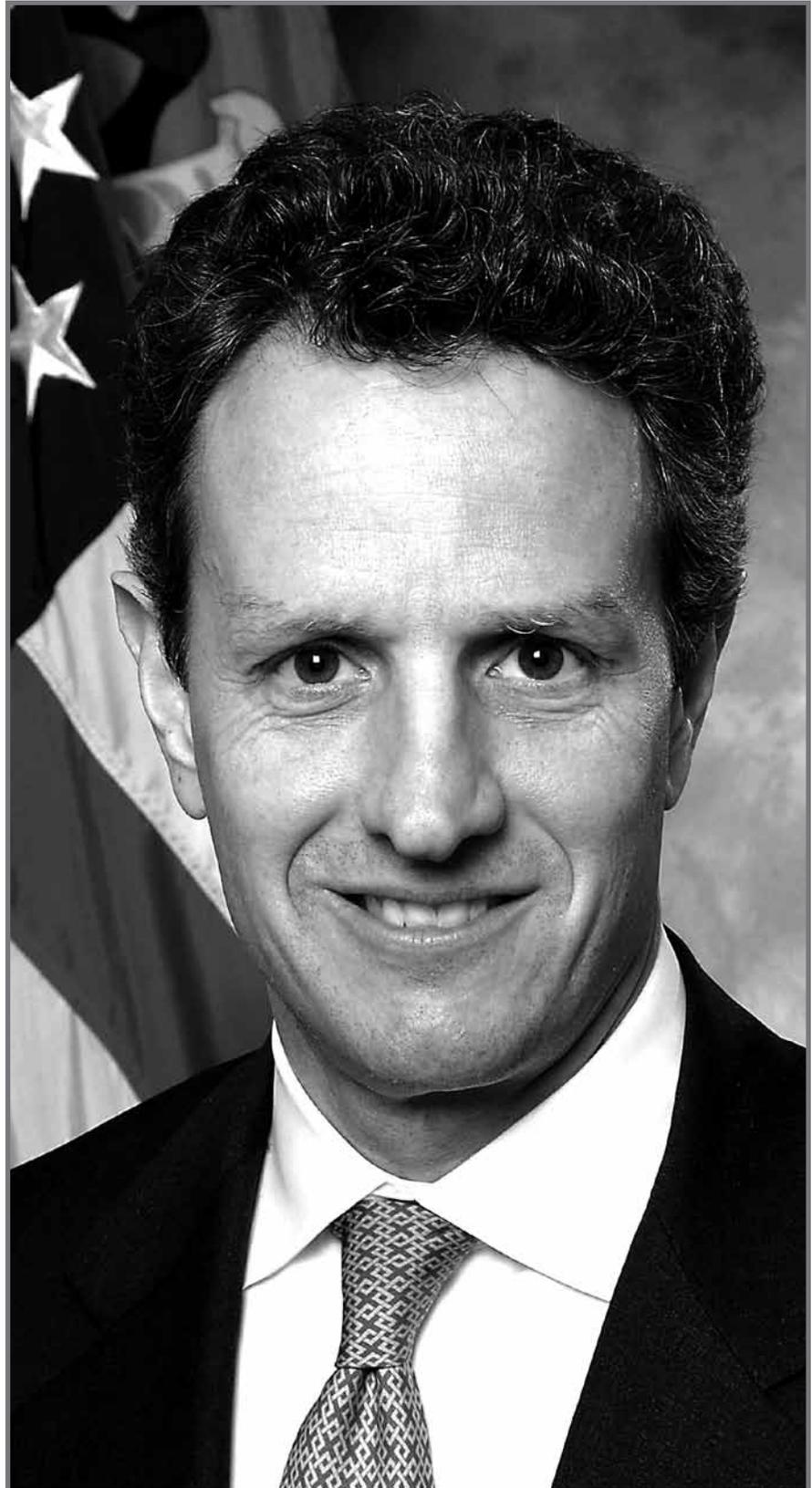
These purchases were to be funded, to the tune of eighty-five percent, by loans from the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation—which is to say from the taxpayer—that would be non-recourse in nature. This means that if the assets turn out in the end to be non-paying, they would default to the FDIC and the losses would be absorbed in the first instance by the

public/private partnership and then, secondarily, by the taxpayer.

The mortgages that underlie these assets—the securities—appear intrinsically unmarketable. They represent a set of financial instruments that exist only because of the abandonment of state responsibility in the regulation of finance in the Bush Administration. They are intrinsically unsafe. They came to market only because of the pervasive climate of openness, and permissiveness with respect to financial fraud, including by the ratings agencies, whose credibility in these matters is now wrecked. Therefore it seems to be very likely that no matter what happens to the economy, these mortgages will not recover value. They are, in effect, permanently impaired. If there is a market for them in the first place, it is very possibly a market that the banks will have thoughtfully created for themselves by bidding up the price of these assets in order to get them off their books at a high price.

The presumption behind this program is, once again, that the world will return to normal and that, as the economy recovers, those bad mortgage assets will become good again. They will pay off over time, they will retain and regain value, the investors—including the Treasury which will have a seven and a half percent ownership equity share in the partnerships—will make money. There are people who thought that is a reasonable proposition. I am not one of them. The recently-announced delay in the implementation of the Geithner Plan suggests that market participants largely agreed with me. This leaves the assets on the books of the banks and the question of their capital adequacy substantially, and perhaps deliberately, unresolved.

JAMES K. GALBRAITH is Chair of the Board of Economists for Peace and Security, and author of *The Predator State: How Conservatives Abandoned the Free Market and Why Liberals Should Too* (Free Press, 2008). This text is based upon a Galbraith lecture at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. The entire lecture (AIJ's two-part series is covering but a fraction) is forthcoming in the journal *Human Geography*, Volume 2, Number 2, 2009.



Timothy Geithner, a face you can trust.

Let My People Go

SOS ESCLAVES Wins the 2009 Anti Slavery Award

Pınar Hoşafçı

SOS Esclaves (SOS Slaves), a Mauritanian NGO run by the son of slaves, received this year's Anti Slavery International Award.

"I, for my part, together with a number of my friends realized that slavery was unjust, and that we could not accept the traditional law of Mauritanian society", says Boubacar Messaoud, the co-founder of SOS Esclaves at the London ceremony where he was given the 2009 Anti Slavery International award, "Consequently, I consider myself a free and independent man and refuse to accept this law that traditional Mauritanian society has forced on me since birth." In 1995 Boubacar, the son of a slave father, came together with Abdel Nasser Ould Othman Yessa, a former slave owner, to set up SOS Esclaves.

Since its foundation, SOS Esclaves has been at the forefront of the movement to criminalize slavery in Mauritania, leading the campaign to shape public policy to prohibit and punish slavery. Anti-Slavery International said the award was given in recognition of SOS Esclaves' achievements in helping bring about the criminalization of slavery in Mauritania two years ago.

Alongside lobbying over the past decade, SOS Esclaves has been providing assistance to hundreds of people escaping slavery. SOS Esclaves' local branches throughout the country offer food and shelter to people fleeing slavery, and assist former slaves to find work and accommodation. They also provide legal assistance, and counseling to help them overcome the trauma of the experience of slavery.

SOS Esclaves also addresses the discrimination and social prejudice that underpins slavery. They campaign to have equal access to civil and political— as well as social and

economic—rights for those affected and stigmatized by slavery.

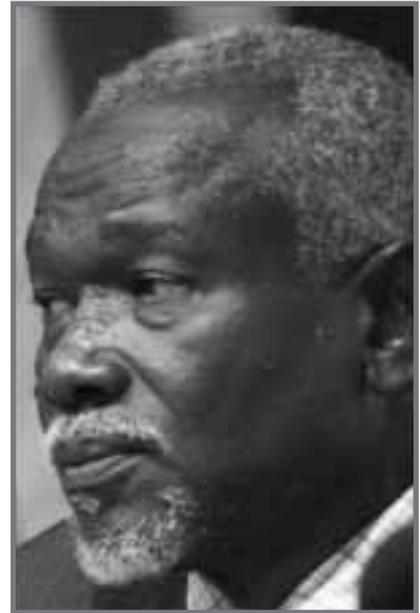
Slavery was officially abolished in Mauritania in 1981, and criminalized 26 years after its abolition. During those years, successive military governments continued to deny and ignore slavery. The state-run media frequently broadcasted reports to tell Mauritians not to associate themselves with SOS Esclaves, and the oppression of those who tried to fight slavery forced many activists to live in exile. Others, who stayed and worked semi-underground, have been harassed, threatened, intimidated, ridiculed, imprisoned, and have risked torture and death for speaking openly about slavery.

MODERN SLAVERY

Millions of men, women and children around the world are forced to lead lives as slaves. Although this exploitation is often not called slavery, the conditions are the same. This includes bonded labour, early and forced marriage, forced labour, slavery by descent, and trafficking.

source: www.antislavery.org

Boubacar Messaoud, the President of SOS Esclaves, has been imprisoned on three occasions. In 1981 he was arrested and held for three months for denouncing slavery. In 1998 he was arrested, along with four other members of SOS Esclaves, for giving an interview about slavery on a French-language television program. They were all sentenced to 13 months in prison but were later released following concerted action by the international community.



*Boubacar Messaoud,
President of SOS Esclaves*

Their lack of official recognition has also meant that members of SOS Esclaves have carried out their courageous work with extremely limited human and financial resources, relying on voluntary work by its members.

Finally, in April 2005 the Mauritanian Government allowed SOS Esclaves to register as an official Non-Governmental Organization and campaign openly for an end to slavery. Following the military coup in August 2005, SOS Esclaves started engaging with the newly formed transitional government and civil society groups to build a coalition to end slavery. Two years later, their efforts triumphed in the official recognition of SOS.

SOS Esclaves is now the leading anti-slavery organization in Mauritania, the last country in the world to officially abolish slavery. It has over 150 members across the country fighting against slavery, exposing the realities of the practice, challenging its widespread acceptance and pushing the cause forward in an environment where political instability continues to threaten the advancement and commitment towards the eradication of slavery.

Photo: SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.ANTISLAVERY.ORG/](http://www.antislavery.org/)

The Rise of the (fallen) Machines

Electronic waste management in Kenya

MURIUKI MUREITHI



Moore's Law, meet Murphy's.

E-waste is an unknown phenomenon hardly making the headlines, but with the increasing volumes of e-waste generated and the poor means of disposal, it is a disaster waiting to happen. Kenya has had no choice but to increase its use of computers to be competitive. A national survey conducted by Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTAnet) in 2008 found that Kenya generates up to 3,000 tons of e-waste from PCs annually— and this figure is increasing.

The enormous challenge however is the lack of a national framework to manage e-waste, thus exposing the nation to environmental hazard. Without a national framework for the disposal of e-waste, it is dealt with in all manner of ways including burning it in open dumpsites, dismantling it to recover parts under unsafe

procedures, and disposing of it as general waste.

The effect of the hazardous material may take a long time to be noticed, however some of the effects were already manifesting themselves; according to a UNEP report, a 12-year-old girl living near the largest open air dumping site on the outskirts of Nairobi was found to have lead-levels that were twice the international norm. The UNEP report maintains that children acquire these levels of lead from the inhalation of fumes from open burning dumpsites, from hazardous dust on vegetables, or from dust on the ground. The study also noted that claims of poor health by workers in the recycling industry were prevalent due to the unsafe methods of dismantling computers.

Among those dismantling computers to obtain parts for resale, for example capacitors, transistors, batteries, network cables, etc, no measures were noted to reduce the health risks to workers. Indeed, workers complained about the smoke from open burning of e-waste, the radiation from monitors, the smell from laser printers that is thought to be hazardous, and the lack of protective gear for handling equipment. The study notes that the long-term impact from the improper handling of e-waste on underground water sources and the air need to be addressed.

The primary reason for concern is that the amount of equipment entering the market through formal and informal channels is increasing. Over a period of four years, the number of PCs in Kenya increased at rate of 60 percent per year; growth propelled by the necessity of launching Kenya into the information society. But the study also found that most of the electronic equipment in offices is old, with 50 percent being over 5 years and in need of being disposed of shortly. Currently, there are many government initiatives to increase the use of computers in schools, businesses, as well as homes. Indeed, the government has eliminated taxes on computers in a bid to make them more affordable.

The importation—and donations—of second-hand computers from developed countries (mostly Europe and the US) has also contributed to the boom; the survey found that they comprise 45 percent of all Kenyan computers. However some of the second-hand imported computers could not function upon arrival. The high level of demand for computers, both locally assembled and imported (and the high level of obsolescence amongst second-hand products) resulted in levels of e-waste that the country does not have the capacity to safely handle.

The study noted that Kenya does not have a comprehensive policy and regulatory framework for e-waste disposal— only the ministry in charge of ICTs (information and communication technologies) has a policy framework

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Photo: AVWIJK / WIKIMEDIA

On the Roma Again

Romani Asylum in Canada

MARIE-ADELE CASSOLA

During an official visit to the Czech Republic in May, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper warned that the rising number of refugee claimants coming to Canada from that country presented a growing concern for his government. As Immigration Minister Jason Kenney had done a month previously, he hinted that if the Czech government did not investigate the commercial networks allegedly orchestrating and profiting from the flow of claimants, Canada would consider reinstating visa restrictions for Czech citizens visiting Canada. In turn, the outgoing Czech Prime Minister, Mirek Topolánek, blamed Canada's lax refugee determination system for attracting an influx of—what he characterized as—economic migrants taking advantage of Canadian leniency.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about this diplomatic exchange, except for the effort both sides made to avoid discussing the people at the centre of the surge in migration between the two countries. Although Canada does not document the ethnicity of asylum seekers, it is commonly recognized that the majority of the 1,500 claimants who arrived from the Czech Republic since visa requirements were lifted in 2007 are Roma, members of one of the largest, poorest, and most marginalized minority groups in Europe.

It is not surprising that both Prime Ministers were reluctant to draw attention to the asylum seekers' ethnicity. For the Czech government, this would raise the question of why so many Roma feel compelled to leave the Czech Republic. For Prime Minister Harper, conceding that the Roma might have a genuine claim to asylum would make the threat of reconsidering visa restrictions

with the express purpose of keeping them out difficult to defend. Instead, both sides engaged in a diplomatic deflection in which they depicted the asylum claimants as non-genuine without discussing any uncomfortable evidence to the contrary.

For the Roma, this treatment is nothing new. Historically, marginalization and discrimination have been their lot across Europe and—more recently—in Canada. In 2005, UNICEF reported that 91 per cent of Roma in Hungary were living below the poverty line, along with 84 per cent of those in Bulgaria and 88 per cent in Romania. In April, the European Committee of Social Rights found that Bulgaria was violating the rights of the Roma to access to health care under the European Social Charter. In the Czech Republic, systemic discrimination against Romani children in education manifests itself in the streaming of developmentally healthy Romani children into schools for children with disabilities. Marginalization within the education system leads to virtual exclusion from the formal job market, and the resulting poverty and dependence on menial labour and begging reinforces the societal stereotypes of the Roma that politicians and the media have proven adept at sensationalizing. Perpetuating the cycle of exclusion, poverty and marginalization make it less likely that Romani families will send their children to school.

Political scape-goating and brazen violence against the Roma have escalated in Europe. In Hungary, seven Roma were killed over the past twelve months in firebomb and gun attacks on their settlements, and in November 2008 Czech police in Litvinov restrained a 500-strong mob set to attack a Romani community. Anti-Roma discrimination and violence is not confined to Central and Eastern Europe, which offers some explanation as to why Roma who feel compelled to (and can afford to) leave the Czech Republic venture as far as Canada. The Roma in Western European states are frequently blamed by the media, politicians, and the public for rises in petty and violent crime. A Roma encampment in Naples was the target of firebombings and

violent riots in May 2008; many of the targeted residents were later deported. That year, the Italian authorities began fingerprinting members of the Roma community—including children—in an ostensible anti-crime measure that a European Parliament resolution described as “an act of discrimination based on race and ethnic origin.”

If history is anything to go by, there is little cause for optimism for those Roma hoping to come to Canada either. In 1997, the Canadian government reinstated visa restrictions on the Czech Republic only a year after removing them—in response to the arrival of more than 1,500 Romani refugee claimants. Canadian politicians depicted the influx as a threat to public safety. This move was followed by governmental attempts to influence the decisions of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) in relation to Roma from Hungary—the Federal Court of Appeals subsequently ruled this as illegal. These attempts to keep the Roma out of Canada occurred despite the fact that the IRB had approved nearly 100 per cent of Czech-Roma asylum claims in 1996 and over 90 per cent the following year.

The IRB defines a refugee as someone who has left their home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The Board has consistently determined that Romani asylum seekers from the Czech Republic fit this description: of the 89 applications from asylum seekers originating from the Czech Republic that it processed in 2008, the Board accepted 84 (5 claims were rejected, 11 abandoned, and 95 withdrawn).

Canada's asylum system is not without its flaws. Asylum seekers who withdraw or abandon their applications and subsequently stay on in Canada warrant attention, and any operators who profit from genuine or trumped-up asylum claims are similarly a cause for concern. There is also an argument to be made that it is not the Canadian government's responsibility, nor is it in its interest, to speak out on behalf of national minorities everywhere. Still, there is a big leap from

Photo: NADIR BEKIR www.iccrimea.org

*On the Roma Again
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acknowledging flaws or staying silent to closing the door on individuals based on an arbitrary assessment of their group's claims as inauthentic— especially when the national refugee determination body clearly disagrees.

The Canadian government is aiming to stem the flow of Romani asylum seekers by questioning their legitimacy at a time when the country's refugee determination system is lending credence to their claims. This is both contradictory and potentially counterproductive, as shutting down legal channels for refugees often leads to a rise in illegal migration among those determined to flee their country. Most worryingly, a closed-door policy will perpetuate a cycle of systemic violence against the Roma in which they are blamed for the discrimination they face with alarming and escalating frequency.

Marie-Adele Cassola is on the editorial board of Alternatives International Journal.

*e-Waste
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for the disposal of ICT equipment. The ICT regulator equally requires licensed operators to demonstrate a capacity to handle e-waste from telecoms equipment. Unfortunately, computers (and their importation) are not licensed and the relevant ministry does not have a mandate for oversight. Neither does the ministry responsible for the environment have a policy, but it is in the process of developing one— and not a moment too soon.

There is a ray of hope; Computers for Schools Kenya (CFSK), a civil society organization working with partners in Europe, is showing the way. CFSK imports second-hand computers from Europe and refurbishes them before donating them to schools. When the computers break down and can no longer be used, CFSK takes back the equipment, dismantles it, and sells some of the parts to local companies. The hazardous material that the CFSK and the country do not have the capacity to handle is then shipped back to their

European partners for safe disposal. CFSK is now expanding operations to handle e-waste from local corporations. While this is a positive first step, what is needed is a supporting policy and regulatory framework for it to be effective on a large scale. A case in point is the introduction of an Advance Recycling Fee, which is common in developed countries to support the safe disposal of e-waste. It is possible in Kenya too— indeed a quarter of the study's respondents were ready to pay for discarded equipment to be collected and recycled properly. What was lacking was a framework for collecting the fee. As well as awareness of the importance of responsible e-waste management, this is what Kenyans need.

MURIUKI MUREITHI was one of two lead researchers of the KICTAnet study. He is also the CEO of Summit Strategies Ltd, an information and communication technology consulting firm based in Nairobi.



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Another Day Will Come

The AIJ's MR Wiseman recently summoned the ghosts of bards-past to wax poetic with Remi Kamazi, editor of Poets For Palestine (Al Jisser, 2008), a collection of old- and new-school poetry and artwork for, you guessed it, Palestine. Go to www.poetsforpalestine.com to find out more and order your copy.

The Proverbial: Poeta nascitur, non fit.— A poet is born, not made.

It was always a part of my being. I wrote constantly as a kid, but never engaged in politically charged material. I grew up in a small town in Western Massachusetts. I spent one year of college at a school in the Bronx, but eventually studied elsewhere. I moved back to New York City four months before 9/11. After 9/11 the climate visibly changed; people became openly anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. The vitriol was palpable in a lot of neighbourhoods throughout the city and I was looking for a way to fight back against the misconceptions and mischaracterizations of the Middle East. That's why I decided to pick up a pen, to give voice to those who had traditionally not been heard and were now being increasingly vilified as a monolithic being... The issue of Palestine has been particularly whitewashed and misrepresented in the US mainstream, and as a Palestinian who was born here, I felt it was important to speak out.

Samuel Coleridge: Not the poem which we have read, but that to which we return, with the greatest pleasure, possesses the genuine power, and claims the name of essential poetry.

The quality of the work will convince readers to return. This is the first anthology where poetry, spoken word, hip-hop, and Palestinian art have come together in one collection.

William Wordsworth: Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.

There are varying emotions, experiences, and stories that make Poets For Palestine complete, but my ultimate hope is that people walk away feeling inspired and empowered by the work. If the reader, as I did, finds solace in Naomi Shihab Nye's "Kindness," feels the devastation of the bombing of Lebanon in Lisa Suhair Majaj's "This is Not a Massacre," or is given wings

by Junichi P. Semitsu's "Palestine in Athens," that is the best I can hope for.

A follow-up from Wordsworth: We poets in our youth begin in gladness; But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.

I think the goal is to contain the despondency and madness. As a poet, writer, and activist, there is an immense feeling of despondency and madness, but what also exist are tiny glimmers of hope. I don't think we could go forward without it.



Remi Kamazi rhymes with reason at a Beats For Palestine fundraiser

Michael Drayton: For that fine madness still he did retain Which rightly should possess a poet's brain.

Remembrance is part of action and so is recording our history. The world became consumed with the sheer injustice faced by the black majority in South Africa under Apartheid, and over the decades people increasingly identified with the inhumanity of dispossession and occupation in Palestine. I try not to fantasize about what Palestine is; a people were here, a people are still

here, and recognition and action must follow; it is up to people of conscience to see that through.

Thomas Carlyle: How does the poet speak to men, with power, but by being still more a man than they?

I can't speak for the poets featured in the collection, but my hope is that their words affect each reader as much as they have affected me. Their voices effortlessly transcend ethnic or religious designations and present a message with an irreducibly human appeal.

Alfred Tennyson: This is truth the poet sings, That a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.

Poetry and art have the ability to translate honesty in a way that other mediums are unable. I believe that's why so many people are drawn back to their art; it's a yearning for honesty.

Percy Bysshe Shelley: Most wretched men Are cradled into poetry by wrong, They learn in suffering what they teach in song.

We have not forgotten and humanity is on our side.

A follow-up from Shelley: Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Freedom and equality for all peoples would be a good start.

Alexander Pope: While pensive poets painful vigils keep, Sleepless themselves to give their readers sleep.

Knowing that I have had a comfortable life drives me and sometimes makes me feel enormously guilty—not just as a Palestinian, but as a human being. The issue of Palestine helped open my eyes to a lot of other struggles throughout the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and even many parts of America; the injustices taking place are astounding. It may be easier to look away, close the book, and turn off the TV, but what kind of reality is that?