

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

The Devil's Work

Attacks on women set off unrest in Sri Lanka

Laura Cwiertnia

The bloody civil war in Sri Lanka lasted almost three decades. It officially ended in 2009 and with it ostensibly the excessive violence and ethnic conflicts in the population as well. But what is behind this friendly façade? People are still disappearing, the government refuses to investigate past crimes and now numerous attacks by "grease devils" on Muslim and Tamil women are endangering the social peace.

"Please help us. We can't trust anyone here. Tell the world what is happening here." Abdul Marikar, a young Muslim man who is too afraid to give his real name, looks pleading. He is standing on a soft sandy beach with the ocean behind him. Arugam Bay, a surfer's paradise on the east coast of Sri Lanka, looks idyllic. So his next statement seems even more unreal: "They come at night and slice the women open. Large men, fast and strong." Waiter Abdul Marikar is talking about the so-called "grease devils" who have been terrorising his village for a few days now. "They rub themselves all over with grease, hence the name, so you can't catch hold of them." It sounds like a nightmarish fairy story; reports have been coming in from many parts of the country since the beginning of August. At least 40 cases in 9 different districts and always the same story about mysterious nightly attacks on women. The myth of the half-naked "grease devil" who kills girls and women at night has enjoyed a long tradition in Sri Lanka. Now it seems that men armed with knives are turning it into reality.

Bloody past

Anyone familiar with the history of Sri Lanka pricks up their ears upon hearing that the victims are exclusively Muslim and Tamil women. Sri Lanka is home to 75% Sinhalese, 18% Tamil and 7% Moslems. Since the end of colonialism here, the greatest tension has persisted between the majority, the Buddhist Sinhalese, and the minority Hindu Tamils. This conflict reached its height with the civil war that began in 1983 during which Sinhalese government forces fought it out with the Tamil rebel organisation the "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" (LTTE). When the war finally ended in May 2009 with the destruction of the LTTE, the population had suffered 25 years of excessive violence and UN estimates of 100,000 dead.

"The civil war was finally over and now it is all starting up again". Mohamed Tamby, the owner of a small hotel who also does not dare to reveal his true name, tells his sad story: "In 1993 I lost my mother to a bomb from the Tamil Tigers. Then the tsunami came in 2004 and took half my family including my little son. And what is happening now?" Tamby is continually interrupted by the blustering sound of the ring tone on his mobile. It is his wife. "She is afraid. It has happened again. Very close to our house." This quick and agile slender man shakes his head. He and his family will spend the night at a friend's house again, he tells us. The men keep watch together before heading off to work as usual the following day. "And it is Ramadan, so I am already more tired than usual".

A street runs behind the tiny hotel. It is peak season. Normally at this time of day it would be full of people, the smell of food and noisy tuc tucs, the ubiquitous three-wheeled taxis. But all the stores are closed, the town's residents are at home behind their own four walls. An army soldier has been

posted on every corner. The tension is particularly palpable since only 20 meters and a few small stone houses separate the hotel and the idyllic beach where light-hearted tourists are enjoying the tall waves and hot sun.

Country-wide unrest

Yet the soldiers are not here to protect residents against potential "grease devils", but rather in response to violent riots from the day before. Only 10 km away in the small village of Pottuvil, men lit car tires on fire in fury over attacks on their wives and engaged in violent clashes with the military. The protest ended with a number of wounded and one demonstrator dead. He was later identified as a candidate from the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) party in Pottuvil.

All over the country attacks on women have spawned unrest, and the east coast and the north are particularly hard hit, the provinces in which the majority of Tamils and Muslims live. Furious men stormed a police station in Tirukkivil where employees had just recently let one of the apparent "grease devils" caught by inhabitants go a short while before. In Jaffna, Batticaloa, Ottamavadi and other towns people clashed with the police and army. At least five people, including a police officer, have already lost their lives to the violence and hundreds have been arrested.

UN demands

Questions about the perpetrators always result in the same answer: "They want to scare us." Like many others, Mohamed Tamby is convinced the government of President Mahida Rajapaksa is behind the grease devil attacks. "They are soldiers. No normal person is that skilled and quick. They have been trained for this." A variety of theories regarding possible motives are making the rounds. Many assume the violent attacks are the government's attempt to run the minorities out of Sri Lanka, other see a connection to current UN demands to look into human rights violations. "The government wants to provoke riots so they can give the other countries a reason for not speaking about their crimes", Mohamed Tamby believes.

What human rights organizations have been calling for since the end of the war found expression in a United Nations report in April 2011. The Darusman Report incriminates both the Tamil rebels and the Sinhalese government in the final phase of the civil war for having committed severe human rights violations and war crimes. Tens of thousands of civilians are assumed to have been murdered, raped and abused as protective shields.

In its 240-page report, the United Nations put pressure on the Sri Lankan government to finally initiate credible investigations into these crimes. The government's official position, however, expressed a refusal to submit to such scrutiny. It continues to insist that not a single civilian was ever harmed by government troops.

Don't joke with the forces

The government also claims it has nothing to do with the grease devil attacks. According to a police spokesman, "there are no grease devils, these are just normal people suffering from a mental illness". President Rajapaksa talks of a conspiracy designed to weaken his government. Defence Minister Gotabays Rajapaksa, the president's younger brother, explains: "Attacking the forces is a terrorist act. Our forces are capable of facing any threat after facing a 30-year brutal terrorist war. So do not try to joke with the forces." Additionally government spokespersons threatened severe consequences for anyone who incites further panic with stories of grease devils.

This threat comes too late though, for fear is already omnipresent among the people. Women hardly leave their homes anymore, men are organizing themselves to protect their families. "I am afraid. We are all afraid. But what can we do?" Abdul Marikar brings a guest a cool beer. He just got a call from his sister, who said something happened at their neighbour's house. Marikar's nervousness is apparent, but he remains the perfect host, ensuring no one is lacking anything, not even a serviette. For in addition to his fear for the safety of his family, this is his next greatest fear: that the tourists will stay away. Preventing this from happening is also in the interest of the government who is intensively promoting tourism along the east coast. In a few years, this former civil war zone is supposed to be flourishing like the south-west coast. Huge hotel resorts are planned, like the luxury resort in Passekudah Beach that Basil Rajapaksa, Development Minister and another of the president's brothers, opened recently. This is why the image of Arugam Bay as an unsullied idyll is maintained: heavenly sandy beaches, sunbathing and training for the Surf World Cup. There is not a shred of evidence of the violence hidden just a few meters behind the peaceful façade.