

Australia – Sri Lanka Relations

by Gajalakshmi Paramasivam

(October 23, 2012, Melbourne, Sri Lanka Guardian) Due to the war in Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka has become an important part of Australia. This is not always confirmed by the leadership but in real terms, more Australians are aware of Sri Lankans than they were before 2009. Today's news says 'Sri Lankan police ask Interpol to find a fishing trawler stolen to transport asylum seekers to Australia.'



The report states also 'Sri Lankan authorities say they have detained over 1000 people who have tried to leave for Australia illegally this year. Australia hopes the prospect of years in detention on remote Pacific islands will deter asylum seekers from attempting the dangerous sea voyage, which has cost hundreds of lives over the past decade. Sri Lankans pay up to \$US3000 (\$A2925) for a place on trawlers which take around two weeks to make the treacherous crossing to Australia'

Australian Government's 'hope' that years in detention would deter asylum seekers is based on their own investment in the issue of Sri Lankan war. The asylum matter cannot be separated from the main issue if we are seeking long term solutions. Once the human component is greater than the visible objectively measurable outcomes, the issue becomes a program by insiders and should not be looked at as a project for the direct consumption of outsiders.

More and more Australians of non-Sri Lankan origin – (for example – Professor Damien Kingsbury , Director, Centre for Citizenship, Development and Human Rights, at Deakin University) are engaging at the human level in the Sri Lankan issue. The real value of such engagement cannot be objectively measured – largely due to confidential sharing. Relative to Transparency, this Confidentiality has lesser value in Democracy. In terms of Sri Lanka, the investment in Democracy is far weaker than the investment in Autocracy. Hence who says something is of greater value than what is being said. The more Equal the Opposition we have –

the closer the matter gets to the democratic level. That's when it is ready to be measured objectively. That is when it contributes naturally to the system of Democracy.

The real opposition to Australian Government's investment in preventing boat arrivals is the Community of migrants themselves. They are the predecessors of these new arrivals and by now they have a voice in Australia and beyond. The level at which we hear such opposition is the level at which the matter has earned the support of Democratic resources, including Democratic policies. Like Professor Kingsbury, most migrant leaders from Sri Lanka are busy taking up the position of Opposition of the Sri Lankan Government headed by the President of Sri Lanka. There are however, a few who invest at the level of the People.

Alana Rosenbaum of Brisbane Times whose article 'Australia bound ... at any cost' was published on 17 October 2012, states 'During Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war, India took in more than 100,000 ethnic Tamil refugees, many of whom are now seeking to take their asylum claims to Australia. In the past year alone, police in Tamil Nadu say they have stopped 17 boats from setting sail and 900 people have been arrested.'

Relative to the Sri Lankan authorities – the Tamil Nadu authorities seem to be doing a better job in 'stopping the boats'. To my mind, a key reason is that 'confidential' sharing between the authorities and the community that these would be asylum seekers are part of. An event is received differently by different persons/groups due to the deeper investment in the issue/environment in which the event happened. Insiders would tend to view the event as if they were the participants. This is the advantage that the Tamil Nadu authorities have over the Sri Lankan authorities most of whom do not have this 'deeper' human and ownership link with the perpetrators. This would continue until we have self-governance with appropriate systems through which Democratic outcomes are produced to confirm one's eligibility to that independent status.

As per the Sri Lankan newspaper Daily News – 'Defence and Urban Development Ministry Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa will meet External Affairs Ministry officials shortly to discuss how Sri Lanka could coordinate efforts with the Australian government to address the illegal immigration problem also involving Sri Lankans.

Defence Ministry sources yesterday said, the External Affairs Ministry has requested a meeting in this regard with Defence and Urban Development Ministry Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. External Affairs Ministry Secretary Karunathilaka Amunugama said, they made the request consequent to a proposal by the Australian government to set up a committee comprising officials from the Sri Lankan and Australian governments to look into the illegal immigration issue.'

To my mind, each government would use this committee to make statements and take actions to satisfy their voters. This would not get through to the officers, leave alone the would-be refugee community.

Through my own experience, the better way is for 'Australians' (those who feel Australian) to take themselves to their counterparts in Sri Lanka. Academics to Academics; Politicians to Politicians; Administrators to Administrators and most of all Refugees to Refugees. How many Australians who have gone through the refugee experience have engaged directly with these

communities from which the refugees come? That is the only part that would result in real solutions. The rest are quick answers for easy consumption by lazy voters.