

July '83

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# Structure of my presentation

- The Context - background causes – key dates from 1976 (5 min)
- What I Saw, Felt and Did as violence broke in Colombo (10 min)
- What the consequences were for Sri Lanka (5 min)

# The context

## Key dates and events

- 1976 14<sup>th</sup> May – formation of Tamil United Liberation Front and adoption of Vaddukoddai Resolution – ‘to restore and reconstitute a free, sovereign, secular, socialist State of Tamil Eelam’
- 1977 General Elections – UNP – 140 seats; TULF - 18 seats; SLFP – 8 seats; (Amirthalingam) (TULF) Leader of the Opposition

# The context

## Key dates and events

- 1981
- 31 May - 3 policemen killed in Jaffna town after TULF DDC election meeting; shops set on fire
- 31/1st June night – Burning of Public Library; by Police
- 4<sup>th</sup> June – Jaffna DDC elections; rigging by Government; but TULF win all 10 seats in District

# The context

## Key dates and events

1982

- 20<sup>th</sup> October – Presidential Election; JRJ wins second term.
- But N and E votes solidly for SLFP candidate Kobbekaduwa
- 22<sup>nd</sup> December– Referendum; in place of General Election; all districts in North and East vote against the government

# The context

## Key dates and events

1983

- 23rd July – 14 army soldiers ambushed/killed at Tinnevely by LTTE; retaliatory rampage by Army kills 50
- 24<sup>th</sup> July – (Sunday) Funeral of soldiers at Kanatte; Burning of Tamil shops and houses; pogrom commences
- 25<sup>th</sup> July – 35 prisoners killed at Welikade (Monday); Curfew declared - 6 pm to 6 am
- 26<sup>th</sup> July – 18 more prisoners killed
- 29<sup>th</sup> July – (Friday) ‘Black Friday’ – rumour of sighting militants in Pettah; pogrom intensifies

# What I witnessed (in first few days)

- Armed mobs looking for Tamil (kotti) residents
- Mob on way to attack Bambalapitiya Kovil
- Looters carrying away household and shop electronic goods
- Torched Tamil businesses – big and small
- From B’pitiya to Mt Lavinia, Galle Road blocked by wrecks of burnt - out vehicles. In Wellawatte lanes houses smouldering
- Heard of killing and injury of Tamils pulled out of cars. (malki)
- Heard of Police stations chasing away Tamils who sought refuge
- Knew of several Sinhalese families who hid Tamil neighbours from marauding mobs; did so myself

# What I felt (as PM's Secretary)

- Immense sadness, anger and helplessness at plight of Tamils
- Propose to President that since our Police and Army would not protect the Tamils he should ask India to give us a Punjabi Contingent. (I did that but was gently but firmly countered)
- Do something to stop the mayhem. 'wait for the cyclone to subside'
- Confront the mobs personally if possible using moral authority
- Reassure the frightened and hopeless that some of us would stand by them
- Why did it happen. How could 'normal' people behave like this
- Felt I was in the minority, even in my own family
- How would I have felt if it had happened to me. Only two options – to Flee or Fight



# What I Did

- Accepted with satisfaction President's appointment, on 'Black Friday', as 'Commissioner – General of Essential Services' under Emergency, with special powers
- Govt Agents (GA's) made Deputy Commissioners with delegated powers
- Set up Secretariat at Royal College; all schools made available as Welfare Centres for displaced persons.
- Worked with NGO's in provision of security, food, water, sanitary services, first Aid etc
- Set up rudimentary 'family reunion' service between welfare camps
- Flew to Jaffna on 4<sup>th</sup> August to speak to 'returned displaced' and apologize for what had happened to them

# What office of CGES did - Transport

- Train, road, sea and air transport\* for those 'displaced' in Colombo (who wanted to go) to North and East. The well-to - do to their 'homes' and others to welfare camps.
- By Ship – to Jaffna - 18,908
- By Train – to Jaffna, Batticaloa and plantations - 8,163
- By Air - to Jaffna, Batticaloa, Trinco - 1375
- By Bus – to plantations – 750

*\* Report of CGES – Feb 1984*

# Care and maintenance of Welfare Centres

- Almost overnight 100,000 displaced in Colombo (more outstation) in makeshift centres - in schools, churches, kovils, Ratmalana airport hangars
- Responded (with NGO's) to diverse 'felt needs'
  - Security, food, clothing, medicine
  - family reunion
  - Recreation for the young
  - Employment for the employable – cooks, waiters, labourers etc

# Safeguarding of property rights of destroyed Tamil homes and businesses – REPIA\*

	<b>Number Affected</b>	<b>Number De-vested (31.12 83)</b>
Industrial units	122	103
Trade Outlets	2300	1340
Houses	7500	4437

# Consequences of July '83

- Bitter memories in minds of all Tamils who lived through these days. Unforgettable.

# LTTE strengthens

- Gains recruits massively
- Becomes the protector of the Tamil civilian; the shield

# Partition of Sri Lanka

- Displaced in Colombo and other towns being sent to North and East for safety and security leads to physical and psychological partition of country

# Rise of powerful diaspora

- Memories of hurt and suffering fuel most able Tamils leaving Sri Lanka for Europe, America and Australia.
- Approximately one and half million Tamils



# Permanent Indian attention to Tamil problem in Sri Lanka

- Unofficial help to stiffen militant resistance
- Indo- Sri Lankan Agreement of 1987
  - 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment
  - Tamil as an Official language
  - IPKF

# Any prospect of getting together again

- Very slight – BUT
- Fortified by:
- Memory I carry of a young Tamil female on a refugee night train leaving Fort for Jaffna in July '83 who softly mouths the words 'poitu vahiren' at me through the closed window

End