

Sri Lanka: A Glimpse Into Our Apocalyptic Future?

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Tom Plate says, in our global village, we can't afford to turn away from the town burning next door

Los Angeles --- You can, as smugly as you want, view the savage, desperate, dire deterioration in Sri Lanka as little more than a flashback to the past -- a kind of backslide into the dank grave of history. Those silly little Sri Lankans, how they kill one another over there in the shadow of the island's beauty, in their half-forgotten country, off the coast of India, about which no one really cares.

Or -- more alertly, more sagely -- you could view the savage civil war there as a glimpse of the future apocalypse facing the world. The feral chaos is now fully resumed, up-and-gunning, suicide-bombers and child soldiers back on their dreary, deadly beat, doing their evil things. This former Ceylon may just be the canary in the cage of the mine that is this planet earth.



So frail, the tell-tale canary that is Sri Lanka becomes one of the first signs of a larger apocalypse, as global vapors of self-destruction seep deep into the soul of our society. To our peril, we ignore the plight of the 19 to 20 million Sri Lankans reeling now in a downward spiral of state-of-nature violence. Here is the issue: As the edgy, annoyingly perceptive economist Joseph Stiglitz has been arguing over and over again, our world may be evolving into some kind of economic cosmopolitanism, but politically it has remained a fossil. Economic globalization has so greatly outpaced political globalization that huge and untamed forces fester among us without sure-handed global political governance.

The very fact that Sri Lanka has slid back into darkness tells you two things of great importance.

The first is that peace and humanitarianism are not possible without a proper political foundation. In the end, politics -- even more than economics -- remains central to order.

The world is not flat, it is a succession of poisonous eruptions from deep within our collective human misery. "The [prior] peace process was a brave attempt to end an apparently intractable conflict," explains Robert Templar, of the International Crisis Group. (It has just released a truly valuable report titled [Sri Lanka: The Failure of the Peace Process](#).) "But," he adds, "it ignored hard questions. Until political attitudes on both sides are altered, the conflict is likely to worsen." And this comes after a quarter-century of civil-war conflict that sent more than 100,000 Sri Lankans to their graves.

So if political hearts are hardening anew, rather than opening up, what do you do? One way to look at the dilemma is to imagine the world as a truly global village. If the town next to you (Sri Lanka) is going up in flames, do you not send in the police and fire departments -- and maybe even the National Guard? After all, it only takes but one village in flames to potentially engulf the globe. Evil is both venomous and contagious

Alas, take a look at the global cupboard -- we have no world police or fire department, we have no capability to douse such flame. We can but watch, weep and bemoan. What a rebuke this is to our level of global development! Forget all the conflicts of the 19th century, just focus on those of the 20th -- especially Stalin, Hitler, the two world wars, the nuclear demolition of two Japanese cities, Pol Pot, and so on. Is it really the limits of our ambition to simply watch the house next door go up in flames as we turn away?

The world economic community possesses flawed but valuable global institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. I hate to hold either of them up as examples of anything, but if they can be improved, they hold up hope of containing monetary and economic conflagrations.

We need something similar for the Sri Lankas of this world. UN peacekeeping is one thing, NATO intervention (as in Afghanistan) is another. But, as the International Crisis Group points out, the decision of the central government in Colombo -- representing the majority Sinhala ethnicity -- to pursue a military solution against the north and east -- harboring the minority Tamil ethnicity -- had predictable

results. More people died; and in the northeast, some 200,000 have had to flee their homes this year alone.

You would think that 25 years of this kind of senseless chaos and slaughter should be enough for anybody, especially for such a tiny country. But at the bottom of the human heart there would appear to be a sunken whirlpool of cruelty. The Sri Lankan horror is not only a rebuke to Sri Lanka -- but to us all. Is this the world we want to live in? Or, is this jungle-world our future fate, precisely because our wretched human heart deserves no better and at bottom can imagine nothing else?

The views expressed above are those of the author and are not necessarily those of AsiaMedia or the UCLA Asia Institute.

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