



*"The heat is on, on the street
Inside your head, on every beat
And the beat's so loud, deep inside
The pressure's high, just to stay alive
'Cause the heat is on"
- Glen Frey*

The heat is definitely on the regime of Mahinda Rajapakse. It is on the streets of Lanka. It is on in Geneva where the 19th UN Human Rights Council meets as I write. The twofold onslaught is the government's biggest challenge after its defeat of the LTTE.

In Geneva our team leader GL Peiris began on the wrong foot by criticising the US for its own alleged human rights violations. If this is what he knows about diplomacy he's got it all wrong. This business of attacking the US-led West has lost all perspective and is truly counterproductive in diplomatic terms. Let's take a simple local analogy: It is common observation that the man -in- the- street in Sri Lanka is impelled to acknowledge the might of the Rajapakse family members and their cohorts in their dealings. In like manner small countries like Sri Lanka have to reckon with the might of the mighty on the international scene. It is not like we are playing cricket with Australia.

Insulting and attacking the US and UN are utterly stupid acts. GL's wrong speech follows a tradition of diplomatic faux pas that perhaps began when Wimal Weerawansa started his maranthika upawasaya in front of the UN office. GLP has demonstrated kid's stuff. If that is the beginning, it's not hard to imagine what the end might be.

If one is to meet the challenges of the US and its massive allies one must act realistically based on a proper understanding of our strengths and weaknesses. Our rulers must be cautious not to offer threats to these powers. Steering our path wisely through the tricky terrain of big power politics is the art and the heart of all diplomacy. The West has had its hypocritical moves and there is no doubt about that. But we need not rub that in their eyes. The US has been nervous about Sri Lanka's mindless backing of China and Iran. Remember how India trained the LTTE in their soil to undermine the Sri Lanka government? Why did India do that? Because our government was perceived as willing to look after US interests. At that time India was hostile to the US. These are real politic geopolitics and if our government is unable to comprehend that we are seeking trouble. We have another problem of our making in meeting international pressure. Government appointed its own Truth and Reconciliation Commission manned by its own trustworthy people. The Commission although it side-tracked the issue of accountability for alleged war crimes did make some sensible recommendations which if we implemented would have helped to ease the pressure on us. However, President Rajapakse hadn't the nerve to step out and implement the proposals. With regard to issues like devolution government bought the fear spread by its own chauvinistic backers that devolution means separation. This is nonsense as a devolved system with defence powers firmly within the centre and with centre's power of dissolution in the event of threat to national, integrity would not spell that danger. Earlier this month two US officials visited Colombo to announce the planned US move against Lanka in the HR Council. The resolution is to say that the government has not done enough to implement the recommendations of the LLRC Report, and to demand a roadmap for reconciliation in keeping with them.

Government's own domestic human rights violations are also not helping it internationally. The questionable prosecution and jailing of war-winner General Sarath Fonseka and the heartless incarceration is absolutely shocking especially when one views that

action against the broader context of supine leniency extended to govern backers guilty of serious crime. The case of Sarath Fonseka is an ineffaceable scar on the HR quality of the government. By implication the former General who crushed the LTTE terrorists has been categorised as having committed a greater offence than that of Karuna and KP who were front runners in the LTTE mass murders. Confronted as it is with an international Sword of Damocles over its head government should try and keep its domestic record of justice clean. It is not so. Day in and day after one hears of serious instances of lawlessness and of public crimes gone unattended. Day in and day out one notices a declining credibility of the institutions meant to preserve law and to mete justice. These once -respected

agencies are now in shambles due to politicisation. The lid on the suppression of domestic rebellion over government failures appears to have opened by force. This is manifested in the growing mass protests against the fuel hike and the unbearable cost of living. The Governor of the Central Bank has been feeding the public with rosy predictions of high growth, lowering inflation, and strong economic fundamentals. Living in Australia, we know how very responsible and professional his counterpart in the Reserve Bank is. The Reserve Bank here is an independent body although operating within government. The RB keeps a professional distance from politics. However, with Cabraal one sees an almost totally politicised Central Bank whose figures cannot be trusted. We were once shamelessly told that Sri Lanka has an impressive positive Balance of Payments. That claim was hollow because the positive balance was due to large foreign loans that were taken by the government. Now at last the economic realities are emerging with relentless force. We know that Sri Lanka has been having a serious trade gap running into nearly nine billions. In the past, the gap had been reduced by the remittances of our housemaids doing menial work for the Arabs. But now even such remittances have been unable to close a galloping import bill. The impact of the trade gap on our currency was adverse. The Central Bank tried hard to artificially keep the rupee high at the expense of reserves. But how long could we have done that? The IMF and International market forces compelled the government to devalue the cur-



Shyamon Jayasinghe

rency. The pressure keeps mounting while the deterioration of the rupee causes severe hikes in the price of all imports. Crude oil constitutes the major bloc of our import bill. The government had no alternative but to raise the price of fuel over 40 per cent which is an unconscionable rise that causes adverse reverberations right through the economy making the life of the ordinary man unbearable. There has not been a significant rise in the world price of crude oil. Thus the price rise in Colombo reflected the devaluation and also a sizeable added tax to cover the costs of governance.

Governance has to be put on a professional footing with checks and balances being in full play and with incentive for bold entrepreneurial efforts. Not a single structural change has been made to the economy since the UNP government introduced the free Trade Zones, the Mahaweli Development Scheme and the garment factories.

Since the war ended, the President seems to have focused attention in consolidating power rather than in setting up a professional system of government management. This explains the string of unending elections he had conducted in the Provinces and in local bodies. It also

explains why he did away with the salary 17th Amendment and introduced the 18th Amendment in its place that virtually liquidated the prevailing checks and balances on the executive arm of government and permitted an unchecked flow of politicisation.

This obsession with the enhancing and keeping of power has led to a squandering of the wonderful opportunities that opened to Lanka after dismantling the stranglehold of Tiger terrorism. The government has treaded a highhanded course riding as it does on the strength of the euphoria of war success and misled by a host of domestic and overseas sycophants and treasure hunters. That euphoria is fast evaporating as the ordinary man in the street increasingly feels the heat of keeping himself alive and safe.

The public are aware that the costs of government business can be substantially brought down if the government cuts down its profligacy. For instance money guzzling prestige projects like Mihin Air named after the president must close down. The monumental losses incurred by the CEB and Petroleum Corporation must be cut by bold managerial measures. Government must cease dumping money onto ghost projects like the Hambantota Sports Stadium and the Hambantota International Convention Centre. These projects have been carried out by loans and unless they earn quick returns servicing the debts would be an uphill task. Currently Sri Lanka has over US dollar 25 billion in foreign debt. Will the proposed International airport at Mattegoda be an airport sans planes as is the Hambantota Port which is a port sans ships?

The fact is that government has a tendency to reach flights of fancy with tax-



THE HEAT IS ON

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