

Sri Lanka is, truly, paradise. The flow of tourists to this once embattled land in a sense proves the international reputation that the island enjoys as a destination to relax and to peacefully absorb nature's beauty. On the other hand, the cynic can point out that the collapse of the Rupee has meant a rare bonus for incoming foreigners. The cynic has touched a key nerve in the equation.

The sliding Rupee arises out of a sliding economy where a burgeoning trade balance of nine billion tells the tale of a mismanaged country. This in turn has made living a daily battle for the millions of Lankans barring the one per cent of the privileged ruling class, its cohorts, and its marginal beneficiaries. One thing the tourists don't observe is that life for Lankan inhabitants have gotten worse for its people after the war. There is a sharp duality of life-one for the foreigners and one for the domestics.

An organic link exists between the deterioration and the white van sceptre now haunting the island. The white van is the ghastly reminder that those who give trouble will be taken away. A new verb has been contributed by Sri Lankans to the English language: "white-vanning!"

A week doesn't pass without mention of the dreaded white van. It may come to the home of an ordinary citizen, tap at the door and take someone away. Some persons taken away like this, as for instance Eknelygoda, never return.

Eknelygoda wrote critically of the government in the LANKA Enews that is now blocked in Sri Lanka. Rights activists such as the Asian Human Rights Council say that more than 50 people have been kidnapped in the past six months alone. Government backers denounce the rights activists naming them conspirators for "the West."

It is not uncommon for governments subject to accusations like this to defy such accusations by labeling the accusers. Ruling regimes not structured on democratic practices need an enemy to survive. "The West" is the pet enemy. It is conveniently forgotten that it was "the West" that primarily wanted us to militarily defeat the LTTE. To this end the US and Europe took the initiative of banning the LTTE after categorizing the latter as a terrorist group and freezing their assets. Towards the end of the war Prabhakaran was starving without funds and manpower thus incapacitating him much before he fell to the forces of General Sarath Fonseka. The white van represents many ominous things: In general terms it stands for the state terror that has been replacing Prabhakaran's terror. When the Dutch came in place of the Portuguese to take control of Lanka people said, "Inguru deela miris gaththa" ("we got chillie powder in return for ginger"). The parallels are, admittedly, not equivalent but they give a modicum of clue to the relative exchange that has taken place in Sri Lanka.

The most dramatic of white van kidnapping events in recent times was when Australian citizen Gunaratnam and his ally Dimuthu Atygalle were taken away. Now, we have no soft corner for this guy Gunaratnam who appears a creepy sort. The point, however, is that he was kidnapped. Government leaders and police officials denied any involvement in the kidnapping. However, when the Australian High Commissioner intervened, Gunaratnam was released by the police! Atygalle was released after Gunaratnam had been kicked out of the country. This whole

episode did not bring a good name for the government of Sri Lanka that is already facing horrendous charges from the international community with regard to its human rights record. We cite below an AFP report published recently:

"I believed they were going to kill me after they took me away at gun point," Gunaratnam, 47, told reporters via Skype from Australia after he was deported. "They blind-folded me, tied my wrists and legs and sexually tortured me."

"I am lucky to be alive and one of the very few to have survived an abduction by security forces. But, this is not a question about me, but about democracy and human rights in Sri Lanka," he added. Attygalle, 43, a Sri Lankan national, said

on the government when they heard I was abducted," Vidyatharan told AFP. "I did not think they would free me. My prayer was for a quick death when they started assaulting me."



Shyamon Jayasinghe

He has since given up his newspaper work and maintains a low profile.

Journalist Poddala Jayantha, 47, was mugged and taken away in a white van in June 2009, stripped and assaulted and then dumped on a roadside with a warning to stay away from media activism.



human rights lawyer Basil Fernando and human rights activist Brito Fernando. The meeting was convened by a local organization with the acronym 'PHRE' and the objective was to encourage discussion on this adverse development symbolized by the white van. Basil dispassionately traced the above development since 1972 of administrative action replacing judicial action. It seemed to me that the core of Basil's talk was missed by a few vociferous members of the audience who had pre-decided to

## THE WHITE VAN TERROR IN ISLAND PARADISE



shout him down rather than listen to a matter of serious import to our country. I have known these interrupters and was dismayed to find that they haven't grown intellectually since ten years ago when I first met them. We love our country of birth and upbringing and this makes it imperative that we listen to the different spectrum of opinion about what is happening over there. We got to let dissenters say their worth and, if needs be, criticize them at question time. Dissenters are whistleblowers.

From the government side it is

she was taken to the same place where Gunaratnam was being tortured.

"They said I should enjoy a comfortable life abroad without doing politics in Sri Lanka," Attygalle said. "I thought they would kill me, but I told them I expected something like this and that I am not afraid to die."

She was blindfolded and then later dumped in a Colombo suburb.

"Even after the official announcement of the end of that (Tamil separatist) conflict, there has been no end to abductions," the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRG) said. "A tacit policy that the use of abductions may be extended, not only to counter insurgency but also to the suppression of any opposition to the government, has been followed by all recent governments." The AHRG said the only way Colombo could answer allegations of its involvement in the "white van abductions" was by demonstrating "credible action" to stop kidnappings."

The AFP report continued: "In the cases of Gunaratnam and Attygalle, they were both luckier than Tamil newspaper editor N. Vidyatharan, 52, who was grabbed by gunmen as he attended a friend's funeral in Colombo suburb in February 2009, three months before the war ended.

Vidyatharan was allegedly bundled into a white van, stripped and assaulted. He was then handed over to the same police unit where Gunaratnam was dumped by his captors and held for two months without charge.

"Several big countries put a lot of pressure



He said he had been a key figure organizing the funeral of anti-establishment editor Lasantha Wickrematunga who was killed by unidentified gunmen in January 2009," concluded the AFP report.

Police have so far made no arrests in connection with any of the high profile abductions and the Sunday Leader editor Wickrematunga's murder remains unsolved," concluded the AFP report.

The white van represents a malignant trend in the governance of post-war Sri Lanka, namely the replacement of judicial action by administrative action. The accepted law in civilized societies is that alleged offenders must be produced before court and declared by that institution as offenders and appropriately punished. That is the judicial process. What now seems to happen is that alleged offenders are so dealt with by administrative authorities like the police or by the Ministry officials.

About three weeks ago we had a talk given at Rotunda Hall, Monash University, by



indeed disconcerting to hear the reaction of the Acting Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abhayagunawardena. The Minister said: "There may be several groups still carrying arms... Police can't be expected to be behind everyone to stop this." If the Police cannot be expected to put down this criminal activity who can be expected to do so? These are the official utterances one often hears in Colombo today when dreadful things occur. It is strange how the President is silently watching these developments. His Ministers like Merv openly claimed to have murdered public figures but the President is not moved. Shouldn't such admittance mean that Merv should be immediately removed from his high post and prosecuted? The way Fonseka, our war hero, was readily jailed, for instance?

The fundamental precondition for peace and development is the prevalence of law and order. Offenders must be brought to account regardless of who they are. People must be able to trust the law enforcers who must be empowered to act independently of political big shots and politically-backed louts. The opposite is the reality in Lanka and in place of official initiatives to end this state of affairs one observes attempts to cover up, to camouflage, and to continue it.