

Speech by Jan Jananayagam at the Lincoln Memorial
First year anniversary of Mullivaikaal Massacre
15th May 2010

Vanakkam

We are here to pay our respects to the people of the Vanni and to seek justice for them.

We stand here in Washington DC in the very heart of a nation built on a promise, on the promise that all are equal, all are free and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.

We have come here to honour a people who pursued this God-given promise with their very life.

The Vanni region has always been a part of Tamil Eelam. But it has historically been a safe haven. When the Catholic Church fled persecution by the Protestant Dutch in 1670, it was to the Vanni that the Virgin of Madhu fled.

When the Sri Lankan army invaded the North in 1995, it was to the Vanni that the Tamil people as a whole fled; a whole people emptied from their ancestral lands to a new frontier - the largest exodus of a people fleeing persecution in this century.

In 1995, when the Sri Lanka state restored its oppressive grip on the Northern Tamil homeland, the people who chose the Vanni were a people who chose to carve out a new life from nature rather than to return to their ancestral home under repressive occupation.

Like so many people enduring persecution, they chose freedom. They chose freedom above material comfort, liberty over oppression.

But in truth the people of the Vanni chose freedom knowing that it was fleeting, knowing full well that they would be called to defend it with their very life.

And in this freedom they materialized the dream of Tamil Eelam, as it has never before been materialized in this century. This was their gift to us.

When I visited the Vanni in 2004, I saw a land that was beautiful: a land of criss-crossing rice fields, banana and coconut groves. A people who created a surplus of food for export to feed the rest of the island.

In recompense, the unimaginable horror of hunger was to be forced upon this people.

When I visited the Vanni I saw children, as young as seven years old, cycling alone along country lanes. The people of the Vanni did not fear for their children to play outside.

But in 2009, the unimaginable terror of modern war was visited upon the children of this people.

Two decades after the Jaffna library – with its circa 97 000 books, many of them irreplaceable centuries-old original manuscripts of one of the worlds oldest classical languages – had been brunt down by the Sri Lankan state, the people of the Vanni began to build a new library in its memory.

And they did not stop building. They built all of the material institutions of a nation anew. Everything that I saw in the Vanni was built brick by brick with hope and courage.

Yet it was, as they knew and we all knew, a fleeting freedom opposed by unrelenting menace.

And for this reason, every moment in the Vanni was beautiful. The people of the Vanni had acquired a happiness that is only possible when you know that life is precious and fragile.

They were a people united who lived for each other.

Thus when war came to the Tamil people again in 2008, the Vanni represented hope and freedom.

In the final years as the Sri Lankan army came North there fled before it tens of thousands of Tamil people, converging from every direction into this symbolic centre of Tamil Eelam.

They too chose the hope of freedom over the certainty of repression.

But the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness has been cruelly betrayed.

Because the people of Tamil Eelam, courageous as they were, were forbidden to defend themselves. They were forbidden to acquire arms – and we were forbidden to provide them with the means of defense.

R2P – the responsibility to protect – fell perversely on an Orwellian state that was determined to destroy them. It fell to international institutions that had already been bankrupted by their repeated failures in history – the United Nations that failed in Srebrenica as it did in Rwanda .

R2P, like the UN convention on the prevention and punishment of genocide, turned out to be a cynical and false promise issued by bankrupt institutions.

For the Tamil people, the so-called safe zone on the beach was a cynical and cruel manipulation.

It was a place to which the people could be herded and then destroyed in large numbers so that the surrounding areas could be ethnically cleansed.

For the Tamil people, democracy in Sri Lanka is a cynical and cruel promise: a promise collateralized by the morally bankrupt institutions of racism.

For the people of Tamil Eelam were allowed to be murdered and the survivors incarcerated en masse, it was said, so that a new constitutional people can be created from their ashes.

The violent cleansing of the Vanni region and the destruction of everything that the Tamil people had created there was allowed, it was said, so that a new democracy could be built over the very bones of the creators.

In Sri Lanka , where the constitution privileges one language over another, one religion over another, one race over another, one nation over another, the very idea of a single constitutional people is a cynical perversion.

The Vanni was defended till it was no longer humanly possible to defend.

The Vanni was never surrendered.

Those who sacrificed their lives in the Vanni epitomized the fundamental values of the millennial old Tamil nation – the values of courage, duty and truth. This is their gift to us: a gift that will live in eternity.

The Thirukkural says:

“Anpillaar ellaam thamkkuriyar
Anupudaiyaar enpum uriyar pirarrku”

In English, the Thirukkural says: “The unloving belong only to themselves, but the loving belong to others to their very bones”. Those who made their last stand for freedom in the Vanni did so in the hope that a new nation may be born in freedom. Their gift to us is to remind us of the core of our own being.

So yes we must seek justice. But what kind of justice will it be? We can and must continue to seek criminal justice for the perpetrators – under the laws of war and the law of genocide.

But criminal justice alone can never be adequate reparation. We must demand political justice. The soul of the Vanni can only take shape again in freedom.

Yes, great states, great democracies have been built on the deaths of entire peoples. Witness this democracy where we stand today.

The United States of America is founded on the ideal of a single constitutional people. It is built on a constitution that proclaims that all are equal, all are free and that all have the right to the pursuit of happiness.

The people of this great democracy have fought and died to implement this promise – in Gettysburg and Normandy as elsewhere.

But democracy on the island of Sri Lanka cannot be built on a cynical myth. Democracy cannot be built where, a single constitutional people has neither existed nor can realistically be constructed without mass murder; where the proposition that all men are created equal is falsified through every fibre of the state apparatus.

And never again, in the history of mankind must democracy be built on the destruction of a people.

This great American democracy is founded on a promise to those huddled masses yearning to breathe free. In a global era, it is time for that promise to be delivered to the Tamil people.

This must be our pledge to those who built their monument to freedom in the Vanni.

Thamilarin Thakam Tamil Eelam.
Vanakkam.