



MARUAH'S SUBMISSION FOR THE COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO THE LITTLE INDIA RIOT

We submit the following concerns to the Committee of Inquiry (COI) into the Little India riot. We write, bearing in mind, the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the COI. The following are the points that we raise:-

1. How The Riot Unfolded

It is our view that the events leading to the riot needs to be examined in four areas:-

- 1.1 the trigger of the incident(s) leading to the accident;
- 1.2 the reactions in an immediate post-accident period;
- 1.3 the (in)efficacy of handling the situation by both paramedical and security forces; and
- 1.4 the eco-system in which foreign workers operate in Singapore, both in terms of workplace conditions and the social environment/interaction they have with Singaporeans and other communities in Singapore.

As a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working on human rights, we have heard many versions of the events that led to the accident as well as the immediate post-accident events. We ask that the detailing of the incidents by various sources be thoroughly investigated against many claims, accounts from a wide spectrum of eye-witnesses and against electronic and non-electronic records; to arrive at the truth. We are aware that this committee comprises the best selected members and so kindly excuse us if we are stating the obvious.

We believe that points 1.1 to 1.3 above will be the main areas of concern and pre-occupation for the COI. But we are arguing for point 1.4 to be an important area so as to understand trigger actions better. We are of the view that the COI also needs to comprehend the environment of the individuals in this interaction/altercation. We cite the cases of the riots in North London (2011) and show how the Riots Communities and Victims Panel¹ ("the Panel") that was launched in its aftermath looked into the motivations that caused the riot in London.

¹ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121003195935/http://riotspanel.independent.gov.uk/>

This panel highlighted² that the key to avoiding future riots is to, basically, have communities that work:

- a) where everyone feels they have a stake in society;
- b) where individuals respect each other and the place they live in;
- c) where public services work together with the voluntary sector to spot those who are struggling at an early stage and help them;
- d) where opportunities are available to all, especially young people;
- e) where parents and schools ensure children develop the values, skills and character to make the right choices at crucial moments;
- f) where the police and the public work together to support the maintenance of law and order;
- g) where the criminal justice system not only punishes those who commit crimes but also commits itself to making sure – for all our sakes – that they don't do it again

Reading the Riots³, was a project run jointly by the Guardian newspaper and the London School of Economics to look into the London riots. The first phase of Reading the Riots used confidential interviews with hundreds of people directly involved in the riots. It also involved a separate analysis of a database of more than 2.5million riot-related tweets. The second phase involved interviews with police, court officials and judges and a series of community-based debates about the riots. The project found that widespread anger and frustration at the way police engaged with communities was a significant cause of riots in every major city where disorder took place⁴.

There are many reflection points for us in Singapore, from the findings of the Panel in UK and the other reports, even though findings were about the UK community. We are sharing in detail here the approach taken and the findings, as a means to show that this is a matter involving three communities and how they interact with each other – the foreign workers, the Singaporeans and the officers tasked with maintaining law and order.

Thus MARUAH argues that in the case of the Little India riots, there needs to be an examination into why the foreign workers were keen to set alight police vehicles, destroy an ambulance and pelt officers. There also needs to be some examination on the Singaporean responses – laughter at officers running away from the scene, labelling gatherings of foreign workers as a mob and at the general mindless response that swayed intermittently from being bigoted to being compassionate. Understanding these emotions is crucial to preventive work and community-building for a better and more cohesive society.

² Executive Summary

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121003195935/http://riotspanel.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Riots-Panel-Executive-Summary-and-Recommendations.pdf> Recommendations can be found in Appendix A

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/series/reading-the-riots>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/05/anger-police-fuelled-riots-study>

We understand the TOR for the COI may not have clearly spelt out this role. But a check against Section 1(2) of the Schedule to the Inquiries Act⁵ shows that the scope of powers does include “procure(ing) and receive(ing) all such evidence, written or oral, as the inquiry body may think it necessary or desirable to procure; (and) examine(ing) all such persons as witnesses as the inquiry body may think it necessary or desirable to examine, and determine the order in which those witnesses shall be examined”⁶. We humbly put to the COI that understanding the eco-system in which the foreign workers operate in – at work and in a social context – is “desirable” and an important evaluation tool of the riot, as well as a necessary prerequisite in making recommendations to build up a better Singapore.

Our own interviews with the foreign workers a week after the incident revealed that many of them were filled with a shame and regret that their ‘fellow countrymen’ had let their home country down. Some did express that too many liquor shops had been given the licence to operate in the area. Others spoke of how the area was congested for over a decade, more and more people were coming into Little India and yet more areas were being barricaded against having foreign workers using them.

2. How The Response Forces Managed The Incident

3. Current Practices To Manage The Incidents

Points 2 and 3 will be discussed together in the following paragraphs.

We are of the view that the role of the different armed officers needs to be examined closely. There are many actors operating in Little India and there needs to be transparency and greater understanding of their standard operating procedures. There also needs to be clarity on the levels of consistency with which the officers operate. We have heard stories of wonderful auxiliary officers on patrol as well as officers who are rude and have a derogatory attitude to the workers. While the hard-core tasks and standard operating procedures can be examined for levels of adherence, it is also equally important to look at the level of soft skills that officers have; the kind of tone they use and the kind of cultural understanding that they have been equipped with. A case in point appeared on Facebook when officers addressed a crowd of South Asian foreign workers and Singapore Indians at the Rex Cinema by calling them ‘dey’ when ‘Thamby’ or ‘Annai’ would have made a bigger difference. In addition, do our officers understand the crazy love affair the Indian community has with the cinema and that they are united as a ‘brudderhood’ when it comes to working together in foreign lands, very much as other workers are, in a foreign land. This is an important sociological mapping that all community workers get some training in.

⁵ Inquiries Act Chapter 139A - <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;ident=ff84b20c-ba0c-40d4-b3ae-162439edf16a;page=0;query=DocId%3A%22f35daedd-b4da-4944-9bf4-457e1fc931d0%22%20Status%3Ainforce%20Depth%3A0;rec=0#Sc->.

⁶ Ibid

To what extent do our officers receive such training and what is the follow-up training in these areas in a very diverse Singapore.

These comments do not mean that the officers are/aren't equipped with such skills. What is the more important point here is the level of consistency and the ideological framing of respect and dignity for all human beings, while still focusing on law and order issues.

MARUAH also notes good practices on managing riots⁷ or volatile situations. The reading is very interesting on the few methods that we have looked at: - The Madison Approach (1975)⁸; The Cardiff Approach (2001)⁹; the Vancouver Model (2010)¹⁰. A common thread in such situations seems to be one of increasing friendliness and only resorting to the 'uniform' as the arbiter, when it becomes absolutely necessary. It is our hope that internal security experts here and world-wide, especially those who specialise on what is classified as 'ghetto-communities' are invited to share their views, both to appraise the responses during the Little India riot, to assess current post-riot measures for efficacy and also to make the recommendations.

MARUAH fully acknowledges the wonderful and challenging work that our officers do every day. But we are also no longer in an everyday situation. There are ethnic communities among many of the foreign nationalities who live and work here. The officers are deeply challenged and we also need to understand the dilemmas they face, which we contend they do. Our informal interviews with security officers on the ground show that there is stress and a "nagging worry on being able to do the job properly".

4. Provisions Of The Inquiries Act

An examination of the Inquiries Act¹¹ shows that it gives the COI the scope to act in a fair manner. We do raise our concerns over the protection and immunity that can be granted to witnesses under Section 14 of the Act and the Schedule. Section 12 (2) of the Schedule grants witnesses the same immunities and privileges that they would be granted in Court, while Section 6 of the Schedule lays out the penalties for threats to witnesses¹². We are concerned about how the COI is going to ensure the protection of witness. It must be noted that at the COI, witnesses are likely to include uniformed police officers as well as

⁷ <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/august-2012/crowd-management>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Inquiries Act Chapter 139A - <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;ident=ff84b20c-ba0c-40d4-b3ae-162439edf16a;page=0;query=DocId%3A%22f35daedd-b4da-4944-9bf4-457e1fc931d0%22%20Status%3Ainforce%20Depth%3A0;rec=0#Sc->

¹² Ibid

foreign workers. We ask that an approach be taken to deal with the protection of officers and foreign workers so that they give testimony without being intimidated or fearing reprisals.

We also raise the issue of foreign workers as we need to be cognizant of their environment – loss of wages perhaps for the time given to bear witness, threats of deportation, intimidation by fellow workers etc. In addition we also have the issue of having deported workers and what is their testimony to the COI?

We appreciate the open call for people to register via email if they want to give testimony or make representations. We do however have some questions as to whether the foreign worker community has been adequately notified of the COI and the fact that they need to register in order to participate. This may also apply to officers. So the question of who bears testimony is an important issue if witnesses are just going to be identified people, despite this open call. We urge the COI to look for alternative ways of seeking perspectives from non-identified people who are relevant to the Inquiry as well.

5. Recommendations

MARUAH hopes that the COI will make recommendations to improve the logistics around recreation-gathering for foreign workers, the transportation issues, the social bridging that both Singaporeans and foreign workers need to make as we live as a community in Singapore, the work of the armed officers around security, the communications role of the government leaders, the role of employers and to look at the recommendations for expandability as these need to apply as equally as possible to any situation or locale in Singapore.

MARUAH appreciates the time and work that the COI is devoting to this Inquiry. We will be happy to help if needed. We have written in to ask to be at the Inquiry. Our President, Ms Braema Mathi, founded and led Transient Workers Count Too and has made presentations on migrant worker issues. Hence the interviews for workers and informal chats with security officers cited here were conducted by her.

We look forward to being a part of the COI process and remain interested in working towards a greater understanding of the issues surrounding the Little India riot.