"The brave Sivaram, at the age of 46, is with us no more. The mean and mediocre remain; the outstanding are dealt death by evil. The internationally acclaimed journalist was murdered"

The famous journalist from South Asia sat there at the cafe table on the sun-splashed dock of the Ritz-Carleton Hotel in Marina Del Rey, California, some weeks ago with a look of hard anger in his eyes. It was the kind of anger that the pressures of life pound into a kind of fierce diamond of personality. The anger cannot be scoffed off with kindly thoughts or charm or witty banter.

Well, I am a journalist myself – have been for decades; but I have not in very long time met a journalist as quietly angry, as deeply weathered and as thoroughly philosophical in an almost religious way as this hardened but caring man. If I may be permitted this analogy, he reminded me of an Asian Albert Camus, the legendary literary figure who cared so passionately about his eternally messed up but transcendent France.

A prolific writer and keen observer of his beloved but deeply troubled Sri Lanka, Dharmeratnam Sivaram was uncompromising, prescient and sometimes easily irritated. I riled him a bit with my lame (he thought) proposals for ending the troubles of his country. Sri Lanka, for decades has been enmeshed in a bloody civil war and is now trying to get back on its feet after the devastating tsunami of last December.

Don’t you understand what’s happening (his eyes and signs seemed to be saying) as I blithely proposed my Canadian-like solution for the divided land of Sri Lanka – that is, a measure of self-governance for the minority Tamils in the island-nation’s northeast, not unlike the deal for the minority French-Canadians. Don’t you understand, he seemed to be saying: There are right-wing elements of the ruling government in Colombo that don’t want a settlement, they don’t want Tamils to have equality, they want some of us dead.

His last published commentary – fiery and in-your-face – reflected his Machiavellian abhorrence of but also fearsome respect for the evil political and anti-humanitarian spirits swirling over and through his otherwise beautiful land. “Don’t raise false hopes amongst our people,” he bluntly wrote, scoffing at the well-intentioned efforts of Norwegian Special Peace Envoy Eric Solheim to mediate between the country’s long-warring factions. He gently chastised the peace envoy for his naivete and fiercely lambasted the central government for its inherent and unrelenting bad faith.
Wrote this brave journalist: “People of the north and east remain without economic growth or jobs. Scars of the war remain. Thousands of people who have lost their homes, land and whole villages to the Sri Lanka armed forces still live in desperation……”

The brave Sivaram, at the age of 46, is with us no more. The mean and mediocre remain; the outstanding are dealt death by evil. The internationally acclaimed journalist was murdered.

Late last month, late at night, Sivaram was set upon by a quartet of assassins and shoved into a waiting vehicle. This did not happen in some remote mountain village. This happened in the heart of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, the island nation of more than 20 million off the southern coast of India.

They did not find his body until morning. The martyr for peace, reconciliation and press freedom was found by the side of a marsh, not far from the country’s parliament. At the scene was a spent cartridge from the 9 mm pistol used to kill him and the napkin used to gag him.

The anguish felt worldwide perhaps surprised the morally suspect government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Her parliamentary coalition includes a right-wing party, some of whose prominent followers include types that might arguably be characterized as little more than thugs – and whose views on the minority Tamils are neither subtle nor secret.

Many organizations have filed their official condolences and lodged their heartfelt outrage. But no one has so far been more eloquent and more direct than the ordinarily self-effacing Akio Suda, the ambassador of the government of Japan, a country so frustrated that its sincere and long-standing efforts to help Sri Lanka escape its murderous past have achieved so relatively little.

“I was shocked and extremely disturbed by the news of the abduction and killing…..,” he said in a formal diplomatic and media statement. “Whatever be the background of the perpetrators, such a heinous act should not be tolerated. Freedom of speech is the very basic component of a democratic society and should be upheld and respected….This murder…must not be ignored by those who advocate peace and democracy. I vehemently condemn this dastardly act of the murder of Mr. Sivaram…..”

Then, the distinguished diplomat closed on a note of optimism. Suda said that “such despicable acts” will not hinder the efforts of promoting the peace process in Sri Lanka.

That's the noble hope, to be sure; and that's what diplomats are for – to offer a peaceful process and the hope of no more war. But it is not hard to imagine the look on the face of the ghost of Sivaram; the look would suggest that hindering peace and promoting war was indeed the very intent of his assassination; and that, more likely than not, this is what will ensue from it.