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Woman's Inspiring Struggle for Social Justice Reaches Tragic Climax In P.O.V.'s "No More Tears Sister," Tuesday, June 27 on PBS

Hopes of a Generation of Sri Lankan Revolutionaries Are Destroyed
By War Between Government and Murderous Rebels

"This is a deeply moving film on the life and courageous witness of a remarkable person. Rajani Thiranagama's commitment to peace, justice and coexistence is a great inspiration for all involved in the struggle for human rights." – Archbishop Desmond Tutu

If love is the first inspiration of a social revolutionary, as has sometimes been said, no one better exemplified that idea than Dr. Rajani Thiranagama. Love for her people and her newly independent nation, and empathy for the oppressed of Sri Lanka—including women and the poor—led her to risk her middle-class life to join the struggle for equality and justice for all. Love led her to marry across ethnic and class lines. In the face of a brutal government crackdown on her Tamil people, love led her to help the guerrilla Tamil Tigers, the only force seemingly able to defend the people. When she realized the Tigers were more a murderous gang than a revolutionary force, love led her, publicly and dangerously, to break with them. Love then led her from a fulfilling professional life in exile back to her hometown of Jaffna and civil war, where her human-rights advocacy made her a target for everyone with a gun. She was killed on Sept. 21, 1989 at the age of 35.

As beautifully portrayed in Canadian filmmaker Helene Klodawsky's **No More Tears Sister**, kicking off the 19th season of public television's P.O.V. series, Rajani Thiranagama's life is emblematic of generations of post-colonial leftist revolutionaries whose hopes for a future that combined national sovereignty with progressive ideas of equality and justice have been dashed by civil war—often between religious and ethnic groups, and often between repressive governments and criminal rebel gangs.

The National Film Board of Canada production **No More Tears Sister** has its national broadcast premiere on the groundbreaking P.O.V. series on **Tuesday, June 27, 2006** at 10 p.m. on PBS. (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films.

Speaking out for the first time in the 15 years since Rajani Thiranagama's assassination, those who knew her best tell about the person she was and the sequence of events that led to her murder. Especially moving are the memories of Rajani's older sister, Nirmala Rajasingam, with whom she shared a happy childhood, a political awakening, and a lifelong dedication to fighting injustice; and her husband, Dayapala Thiranagama, who was everything a middle-class Tamil family might reject—a Sinhalese radical student from an impoverished rural background. Also included are the recollections of Rajani's younger sisters, Vasuki and Sumathy; her parents; her daughters, Narmada and Sharika; and fellow human-rights activists who came out of hiding to tell her story. The film rounds out its portrayal with rare archival footage, personal photographs, and re-enactments in

which Rajani is portrayed by daughter Sharika Thiranagama. The film is narrated by Michael Ondaatje, esteemed author of *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*.

It is the testimony of Nirmala and Dayapala, along with Rajani's own voice in the form of her letters, that creates the dramatic core of the film. Nirmala, a well-known Sri Lankan activist in her own right, still cries for her sister, for their shared dreams, and for their war-torn country. Dayapala is the student revolutionary from the countryside who fell in love with Rajani and never expected, after failed insurrections, imprisonment, torture, and exile, to be the one to survive and to care for their two daughters. Nirmala and Dayapala's grief for Rajani is as palpable as their grief for the war-torn island once thought as close to paradise as any place any on earth.

Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, was one of the longest-colonized countries of South Asia, occupied for significant periods by the Portuguese, then the Dutch and lastly the British. Ceylon was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country made up of Burgers, Tamils, Muslims and Buddhist Sinhalese. Under British rule, these groups had to compete for political representation and economic advantages. Ordinary Sinhalese, the majority ethnic community, felt that the minorities—Tamils and Muslims—were sheltered and privileged at their expense. Once independence came in 1948, elections swept ultra-nationalist Sinhalese politicians into power and a dramatic reversal of fortune began. The Sinhalese wanted to reassert their culture, language, schools, and religion. As the majority, they voted to replace English with Sinhalese as the country's only official language. The Tamil minority, on the other hand, wanted a federal system of government, with more local autonomy in the main Tamil-populated areas. They also wanted official recognition of their language.

Born in 1954, only six years after Ceylon's independence, Rajani followed the elder (by two years) Nirmala through childhood dreams of starting an orphanage for the poor to self-education with revolutionary western and anti-colonial writings. When Nirmala returned from the United States, where a scholarship had landed her in the middle of the anti-war '60s, the sisters' activism took a more radical turn. Only 22, Rajani was a strikingly unusual figure, a woman and a medical student who was also a left-wing activist and a leader of the student Christian movement. Like Nirmala, she advocated social and political equality for all Sri Lankans, regardless of ethnicity or religion. The sisters even looked into starting collective farms in the vicinity of Jaffna. Later, it was Nirmala who induced Rajani, by then a doctor, to help the Tamil Tigers as the only available way of resisting the extremist Sinhalese central government. When Nirmala was jailed, Rajani was thrust into prominence, leading the campaign for her sister's release, which brought her into further contact with the Tigers. Rajani then became deeply committed to fighting for the right of self-determination for Tamil communities, a cause which the southern Sri Lankan Left had neglected in the Tamil areas.

Dayapala shared the sisters' commitment to a revolutionary universalism that transcended ethnic and religious divisions. By the time he met Rajani, he'd already participated in a disastrous 1971 anti-government insurrection by unemployed youths, mostly Sinhalese, under the banner of a "People's Liberation Army," which left 25,000 dead. Dayapala was thrown into prison and tortured. Between bouts of prison, exile, and underground work in Sri Lanka, Dayapala never wavered in his commitment to a non-sectarian vision of social justice. But even as government repression drove more and more Tamil intellectuals into the arms of the Tigers, he warned the sisters to stay away, not only for ideological reasons but because he knew the Tigers never let anyone leave their ranks.

Nirmala faced the truth when she joined Tiger exiles in south India and found the leaders would not allow any literacy or political education of their young troops. Not long after, Rajani confronted the truth while speaking to Tamil refugees in London, where she worked as an anatomy professor and had become the virtual spokesperson for the Tiger organization in Europe. Both Nirmala and Rajani had the courage to break with the Tigers—considered a virtual death sentence, just as Dayapala had warned.

The sisters also had the courage to confront the moral crisis presented by their failed association with the Tigers, and by the defeat of non-sectarian revolution in Sri Lanka. For Rajani, the search for the truth and a way to act on it led her back to Jaffna, where she opposed all the men with guns and helped organize the underground University Teachers for Human Rights, which works to document human-rights abuses and to protect the most vulnerable victims. Given the conditions under which Rajani lived and worked, a late letter predicting her own death (“One day some gun will silence me, and it will not be held by an outsider but by a son born in the womb of this very society...”) hardly seems melodramatic. Rajani seemed to have lived more than one lifetime of struggle when a bullet, undoubtedly fired by a Tiger gunman, brought her down in the prime of her life.

No More Tears Sister is a riveting story of love, revolution, and treachery that explores the price of truth amidst militarized and authoritarian governments on one side, and rebel groups more driven by gangster principles than ideological beliefs on the other. Rajani Thiranagama was a woman of great courage as well as ideals, and her tragic fate exposes the internal forces tearing at many nations today.

“In making **No More Tears Sister**, I wanted to understand how ethnic conflict and nationalist struggles impact women, be they victims, fighters or peacemakers,” says director Helene Klodawsky. “Rajani Thiranagama was part of a generation of young political activists in post-colonial countries around the world whose idealism continues to be ruthlessly thwarted by narrow nationalist agendas.

“I knew that creating a portrait of a slain human-rights activist would be no easy feat,” she continues, “especially given the fact that there were no surviving archives, few photos, and, due to security concerns, no access to filming in Jaffna where Rajani lived and worked. Most of her friends, former students and colleagues were far too fearful to speak about her on camera. Luckily, Rajani’s older sister and husband were willing to come on board, joined by Rajani’s younger sisters, parents, daughters and fellow activists, some still living underground. Cinematically, I wanted **No More Tears Sister** to reflect the passion and beauty of Rajani’s ideals. Together with my talented team, I aimed at making a film that is political, feminist, and aesthetic.

“As a daughter of Holocaust and concentration camp survivors, I am drawn to individuals who, in spite of their very personal encounters with brutality, are committed to bringing light into our world,” Klodawsky concludes. “Rajani and her family give hope that the struggle for human rights and justice will never be vanquished.”

No More Tears Sister is a National Film Board of Canada production.

About the filmmaker:

Helene Klodawsky

Director/Writer

Helene Klodawsky has been writing and directing social, political and art documentaries for 20 years. Her films have been screened and televised around the world and have won more than 25 awards. She has received honors from the Chicago, San Francisco, Jerusalem and Mannheim International Film Festivals, Hot Docs, and the Academy of Canadian Cinema. Her documentary credits include **Painted Landscapes of the Times** (1986), **Motherland** (1994), **What If** (1999) and **Undying Love** (2002). Klodawsky is currently working on **Family Motel**, a feature-length alternative drama about a group of homeless families and refugees in Toronto thrown together in an old motel along a busy suburban highway, and **Til We Drop**, a feature documentary about malls, shopping, and the “mall of the planet.” She is a graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Queen's University in Canada.

Credits:

Director/Writer: Helene Klodawsky
Executive Producer: Sally Bochner
Producer: Pierre Lapointe
Cinematographer: François Dagenais
Editor: Patricia Tassinari
Music: Bertrand Chénier

Running Time: 56:46

Awards & Festivals:

- World Premiere, Hot Docs International Documentary Film Festival, Toronto, 2005 – *Audience Pick Award*
- Amnesty International Film Festival, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2006
- Amnesty International Film Festival, Vancouver, 2005
- Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, London, 2006
- Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, New York, 2005
- Human Rights Watch Traveling Film Festival, U.S., 2005-2006
- Tri Continental Film Festival, India, 2006
- Tri Continental Film Festival, South Africa, 2005
- U.S. Premiere, Seattle International Film Festival, 2005
- Hamptons International Film Festival, 2005
- San Francisco International South Asian Film Festival, 2005
- Vermont International Film Festival, 2005
- Columbus International Film and Video Festival, 2005
- FILMI South Asian Film Festival, Toronto, 2005
- International Festival of Cinema and Human Rights, Barcelona, 2005
- Calgary International Film Festival, Canada, 2005
- Global Visions Documentary Festival, Edmonton, Canada, 2005
- Banff World Television Festival, Alberta, Canada, 2005
- Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal, Canada, 2005
- Guelph International Film Festival, Guelph, Canada, 2005

Original Online Content on P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

The **No More Tears Sister** companion website (www.pbs.org/pov/nomoretears) offers exclusive streaming video clips from the film and a wealth of additional resources, including a Q&A with filmmaker Helene Klodawsky, ample opportunities for viewers to “talk back” and talk to each other about the film, and the following special features:

- University Teachers for Human Rights activists speak out: UTHR members Sriitharan and Rajan Hoole discuss the organization’s projects and explain how the situation in Sri Lanka has changed since the 2002 ceasefire agreement.
- Jo Becker, the Children’s Rights Advocacy Director for Human Rights: Find out more about the children who have been recruited for service in the Tamil Tigers army.
- Film update: Members of the Thiraganama family, including Rajani’s daughters, ex-husband and sister, talk about how families cope with trauma and loss and the importance of remembering the fallen.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 19th season on PBS, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought nearly 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses our unique *Talking Back* feature, filmmaker interviews and viewer resources, and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films. *Youth Views*, P.O.V.'s youth engagement initiative, expands these efforts by working directly with youth service organizations.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Ford Foundation, PBS and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.'s Community Engagement activities and the *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston, and Thirteen/WNET New York.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.americandocumentary.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback, to educational opportunities and community participation. Cara Mertes is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

National Film Board of Canada

Now celebrating its 66th year, the National Film Board of Canada has produced over 11,000 films and won more than 4,500 awards, including 11 Oscars®. As Canada's public film producer, the NFB produces and distributes distinctive, culturally diverse, challenging and relevant audiovisual works that provide a unique Canadian perspective on the world. For more information on the NFB, visit our Web site at www.nfb.ca.

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TAPE REQUESTS: Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.

