

# THE NORTH AFTER THE TSUNAMI

by Paul Caspersz, sj

On 12 July 1979 J.R. Jayawardene, then first Executive President of Sri Lanka, sent Brigadier Weeratunga to Jaffna with the notorious mandate “to eliminate the menace of terrorism in all its forms from the island and more specially from the Jaffna District. The newspapers headlined the mandate as, “Wipe out terrorism by December 31”.

Twenty-five years have passed and what in 1979 went by the name of terrorism is still with us. Brigadier Weeratunga has gone, but a line of others has succeeded him with no more success than he in carrying out his mandate.

## **An Occupied City**

As one stepped out of the plane at Palaly – the plane started very late at Ratmalana some 75 minutes earlier – the first impression was of a city under siege. Palaly is in a High Security Zone (HSZ) and the men and some women of the Southern Armed Forces are everywhere.

### IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-1948 ETHNIC CONFLICT

The airport bus takes you out of Palaly and deposits you half an hour later at its terminus on Hospital Road in Jaffna town. Though you are no longer in the HSZ, you will see the armed men either behind their sandbags at sentry points or walking along the streets alone or in batches of two or three. They pass you by along the dusty streets in army trucks, on motor bicycles, even on push cycles. They look tired men, and bored. At home in their villages they were never condemned to spend their day in heavy army camouflage, socks and boots. Many of them are so small and slender that it wouldn't need a tiger to take them on, two or three at a time, in close combat. They are where they are, only because this is the place in which they are paid to be. They know that if they did not sign up to the Armed Forces they would be members of the rural unemployed. They seemed to be doing their deliberate best to maintain good relations with the people. They do not speak Tamil, of course, yet they do not harass, nor bawl at people rudely. They do not know the ancient history and culture of the Tamil people, their music, their literature, their religious rituals. They have to carry guns which contributes to the atmosphere of occupation and siege. But the guns are not pointed at anybody. When they are not on sentry duty, their task is to perambulate the main streets or remain within the confines of their camps. They are good fellows and probably sigh each long hour for home and village. We were told that they are not given well-cooked, wholesome food, nor anything close to a balanced diet. And when we were there in early February, there wasn't even the famous Jaffna mango season to compensate.

Twenty-five years is a long time, the length of one whole generation. Those who were born at the time Brigadier Weeratunga came under orders to Jaffna are now twenty-five years old. True, they were not at all years of war, of grenades and mortars and filthy barrel bombs, of deprivation of electric lights, motor transport and regular radio news

bulletins and musical programmes. Yet, there was not even one year of normalcy. When abnormalcy is the ordinary, it is no wonder that Daya Somasundaram, Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Jaffna wrote his book on the **Scarred Minds** of his people.

And yet, during all these sad years, the youth heard their parents say that it was never like this – not until the tragic day when in 1956 the Sinhala only Act was passed in Parliament.

### **Sinhala Language**

From the time of the Donoughmore Commission constitutional reforms, indeed from the 1920s and the Ponnambalam brothers, the Tamils, always achievement and government employment-oriented, began more and more to study Sinhala. They sensed that there was, indeed had in the nature of things to be, a growing pro-Sinhala trend in public office: a knowledge of Sinhala was therefore necessary. The trend became more and more open and manifest with the educational changes introduced in the early 1940s and especially after Ceylon obtained Dominion Status in 1948. But once the Sinhala Only Act was passed, it became a sign of public protest and a matter of honour for the Tamils not to proceed with the study of the Sinhala language. One language, two nations; two languages, one nation, pleaded the earlier Colvin R. de Silva. But in vain. The two-nations theory became a two-states demand. The situation continued to deteriorate. And the Tigers were born.

### **Tigers**

During the twenty-five years the Tigers have been omnipresent in the North and all but omnipresent in the East. “Whatever one may say about them, and I personally do not like much of what they say and do”, a prominent Tamil leader told the writer in 1985, “there can be no doubt that it is because of the Tigers that we have been able to hold our heads high in Jaffna”.

However, there are some in Jaffna – a minority – who whisper into your ears that it is not altogether a bad thing for the army to stay on in the North. As long as the soldiers move around, the Tigers have to be careful that the exactions they make on the people do not transgress the limits of tolerability. Sour plantains are sold at Rs 35 a kilogram, but the seller mutters that five of the thirty-five has to go to the Tigers as taxes. Cigarettes are sold at Rs 75 per packet in the South (it is significant that the words North and South are now in the daily vocabulary of our people) but at Rs 90 in Jaffna. “What’s to be done, there’s a tax to be paid”. There are also stories of forced recruitment and child recruitment, often completely against the real wishes of the family and of the recruits themselves.

It was on top of all this that the tsunami waves broke into the land on 26 December.

### **Tsunami**

I am not a TV-fan myself, but am informed that TV coverage of the North and East was – proportionately to the loss of life and property – much less than the coverage of the

South. So were Velvettithurai, Sakkottai and Point Pedro under-covered. Even the blanket wasteland that is now Mullaitivu town did not get the TV footage that it merited.

On the other hand, the Tigers themselves would not have been too welcoming of TV crews from Colombo. Like the JVP, the LTTE is a monopolist. "Come and help us if you feel like it but, remember, on our terms, under orders from us, and with our approval." When the relief distributors were men and women from the Armed Forces, the LTTE sometimes forbade people under pain of the lash to queue up for the relief-packages. Especially in the High Security Zones, but not only there, the Tigers were, to say the least, unenthusiastic about relief by way of dry food rations, fruit, vegetables and clothes. "Give us back the HSZs," they said, "they are our prime land. We can then grow for ourselves all the food we need, and have enough left over to export to you in the South".

### **Itinerary**

At Velvettithurai on the evening of arrival in Jaffna, there was the first evidence of the tsunami devastation in the North. In and out of the maze of little lanes we went to the sea and were told of how the waves invaded the land. At the sentry point three soldiers on duty told us how two of their men were among those washed out into the sea. All the way from Velvettithurai along the coast on both sides of the road the devastation was similar to what we saw earlier on the journey from Colombo, through Koralawella, to Matara.

At the Catholic Church at Sakkottai, we saw a Portuguese doctor and nurse at work with patients: wounds suffered while being tossed by the waves from one tree trunk or stone to another, bronchitis and fevers, severe shock. We were impressed by the devotion to duty of the Portuguese medical team. The priest was there as translator and as friend and counsellor to the children who gather there every evening for supervised night study. Whatever happens, fair weather or foul, the children of Jaffna keep to their books and their priests are close to the people. It was dark when we arrived at Point Pedro. On the way we delayed at a Mahavira Thuyilam Illam. It was one of several in the North and the Sleeping Place of the Great Heroes was most beautifully laid and could not but be a source of inspiration to the youth of the North. How short-sighted it had been of the Army Colonel to order the bulldozer to ride over the graves! Undeterred, the Tigers laid them out again.

The return to Jaffna from Point Pedro was by another route via Kaitadi.

The next day we travelled southwards from Jaffna to the islands. We visited a place of worship which, after the recapture of Jaffna, the Army had used as a soldiers' camp; after many months of negotiations, the Army had finally vacated the place. If there had never been an idea of willful desecration of a place of worship, neither had care been taken to treat places of worship of another faith with respect and reverence. The soldiers who occupied these places of worship had left mischievous drawings on the walls and added playful festoons, sometimes funny moustaches, to religious icons. They often did so without malice, like school children on a picnic, but did not pause to think that they

would hurt the sensibilities of those to whom the place of worship belonged and who had used it, and would one day use it again, for prayer and devotion. In no circumstances – so it seems to me – should a place of worship be used as an army camp. Take the grounds, if needed, the rooms for visiting pilgrims, if there are any, but leave the temple itself untouched.

On 7 February we went eastwards via Koppay, Chavakachcheri, Kodikamam, Miresuvil, Pallai, Elephant Pass and Paranthan to Mullaitivu. If I was asked which single place I had visited after 26 December seemed to have been most ravaged, it wouldn't take me long to say, Mullaitivu. We first went to the Maha Vidyalayam there. The Principal and the priest-teacher were there talking with groups of students. But the school itself was as if it had never been built. About 200 children had gone with the tsunami, some bodies never to return to Mullaitivu. The priest broke down as he told us that many of the children he had buried in mass graves had been his own students. The Principal too was visibly shaken. A wall or two of the pre-school conducted by the Tigers remained. A well-built house still stands, but outside it, planted in the sand were five Crosses to mark the graves of the five people who had lived in it before the tsunami came. Some "Portuguese Burgher" families who lived around the Catholic Church had their homes damaged by the bombing. They repaired them, only to see them completely washed away by the tsunami. We were told that at least 5000 persons in Mullaitivu snuffed out the taper of their lives on the terrifying day of the tsunami.

### **Disaster and Opportunity**

After the savages of colonialism we had the opportunity in 1948 to rebuild our island home. We squandered it. After the disaster of the tsunami on the evening of 26 December 2004 we were given another opportunity to rebuild it. The task was not only to bury the dead – a task which we have substantially completed – but to give the living the opportunity of a better, safer future. The opportunity is not only to build better homes for those who have lost them to the waves but to build a nation of freedom and justice for all. To recall Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism*: "It is a new society that we must create ... a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the sharing of olden days."

The enormous sums of money that have already poured into the country for post-tsunami relief and reconstruction can help to ensure that this new society will have sufficient food, clothing and shelter for the fishing community and for the small artisans along the coasts and, by the multiplier effects of increasing demand by the people of the coasts, for the whole country. But for this firm and decisive planning at the centre with due delegation to the periphery for purposes of implementation is necessary. Most unfortunately, neither central planning nor due delegation to the provinces and districts has been much in evidence since 26 December.

The same date also brought good news for the inter-ethnic situation that has grown progressively worse since 1948. The differences between Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers (the "Portuguese Burghers" of Batticaloa and Mullaitivu suffered like the others) were forgotten. One was just a human person. So persons, also soldiers and

navy, tried to save other persons, even at the risk of their own lives, regardless of ethnic, religious, linguistic and political differences. What was possible on the day of the tsunami ought to be possible every day. To make the possible real is the summons the receding waves of the tsunami issued to us.