



Introduction

One of the most important tasks of the Peace Secretariat over the last couple of years was promoting understanding of the commitment of the Sri Lankan government to an inclusive peace. This was difficult in as much as the effort necessarily involved war, given that the LTTE had steadfastly refused to negotiate. But whilst the struggle against terror had therefore to be conducted resolutely, the need for a pluralistic political solution was never forgotten.

A vital component of the commitment to peace was the awareness of the armed forces that their battle was against terrorists, not the Tamil people. Therefore they were scrupulous in their care for Tamil civilians whom they rescued. Thus, whilst those escaping brought massive amounts of money with them in cash, all this was carefully looked after by the forces. So, when banks started operating in the Welfare Centres, billions of rupees were deposited. Similar care and concern were exemplified in all interactions of the forces with the people who came to safety in government controlled areas.

It was to publicize this aspect of the commitment to peace that the Peace Secretariat commenced, shortly after the war against terror was concluded successfully, a daily series in the 'Ceylon Daily News' entitled 'Api Wenuwen Api'. That slogan, the 'We Support Ourselves' logo, had previously been associated with assistance by the general population for armed forces personnel as they strove to rescue the nation from terror.

The concept itself can however signify something larger, namely the whole range of support we as Sri Lankans can offer each other in moments of national need. In that context, we felt that nothing perhaps better exemplified the spirit of our support for ourselves as a nation than the enormous public service done by the forces to alleviate the suffering of civilians held hostage by the LTTE.

We are well aware of the attempts to rescue them safely, attempts in which many members of the forces sacrificed their lives, because of the need for restraint. But even more remarkable, because outside normal routine, was the humanitarian support that was offered.

This began from the time those who escaped came over into areas under government control, and it went on even after they were placed under civilian guardianship in transit centres and welfare camps. Perhaps as a result of the publicity generated by the tsunami, the impression had arisen that most humanitarian work is done by international agencies and aid workers under international supervision. But this is emphatically not the case. While much is done by foreign nationals genuinely committed to the welfare of others, for many it is routine work in what is an increasingly attractive career. For the forces however this work is unusual and often exhausting, because its results are never clear.

From the hard labour of the engineering corps working 24 hours a day to clear land to the constant vigilance outside the camps to ensure that the suicide bombers who lurk (and have





been caught) outside cannot strike, the forces have to continue to serve our fellow citizens who were deprived of such protection and care for so long.

To highlight some of this work, with a picture often being worth a thousand words, it was decided to publish a daily column with photographs of some of the activities that had been undertaken. These could range from a mobile dental clinic and air passage for the dangerously ill to repair of roads and cleaning of wells. It covered the day long dedication of senior officers and ordinary soldiers, the pilots who took visiting dignitaries to dangerous locations and the waiters who served them their meals there, who stayed on for months with no easy passage to their families far away.

Through this we hoped to shed further light on what it means for us to support ourselves, so as soon to recover together from the tragedy terrorism has brought to all our lives. The first part of this booklet then consists of pictures and the accompanying captions that appeared in the 'Api Wenuwen Api' newspaper series. They convey, we hope, a glimpse of the extensive humanitarian and public service work undertaken by our armed forces and police.

This is followed by a photo essay on the Sri Lankans who have now found refuge with the government, in Welfare Centres as well as in the Rehabilitation Centres for former LTTE cadres. These pictures are intended to document the actual state of the camps, which have come under heavy criticism in certain quarters.

Much of the criticism is preposterously false, as with allegations of over a thousand deaths a week, when the actual figure has averaged about fifty, less than the norm in such cases. There have been allegations of abuse, whereas the records of all agencies engaged in protection, and the proceedings of meetings, indicate that abuse has been minimal, with some problems amongst the displaced themselves, and no allegations at all of sex or gender based violence involving the armed forces.

Some criticisms were however understandable, particularly with regard to initial overcrowding and hastily constructed facilities. These were apparent when tens of thousands arrived together in late April, and in some respects basic standards were forgotten in the urge to provide some relief. Though the errors made by some agencies are regrettable, they have to be understood in context and it would not do to blame them over much provided they improve their work. Now that lapses have been diagnosed, with regard to toilets for instance, UNICEF has been given strict instructions to adhere to national standards so as to ensure decent facilities for our people.

A couple of pages then show areas that need to be improved, contrasted with facilities in areas where government was able to ensure better and less crowded construction. The need for greenery, for areas for relaxation, for play areas for children and adolescents, has been stressed again and again, and government is now able to promote attention to such facilities too. But at the same time it must be recognized that, for people tormented so long by the LTTE, even the basic facilities they received when they were rescued came as a relief.





The pictures then show families together, the education of children and young adults, games and shopping. Though obviously resettlement in their homes must be a priority for them and for government, what they experience now is closer to normality than what they had under the LTTE.

The relative tranquility of their life now is seen in these pictures, and nowhere more than in the concluding pages which show youngsters at rehabilitation centres. It is difficult to believe, looking at their faces, that these were boys and girls who had in most cases been forcibly conscripted, compelled to bear weapons and fight from an early age. Saved now from the LTTE, they can hope to live normal lives. It is our duty to ensure that they enjoy their youth without being prey to further ills, making the transition from terrorist to citizen in a democratic pluralist Sri Lanka.

Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process





Soldiers help civilians cross from Pudumatalan to Vellamullivaikal



The Padumatalan lagoon was a great gulf separating civilians from safety. so the assistance provided by the forces at this stage was especially useful to those fleeing the LTTE.





Soldiers helping civilians at Omanthai checkpoint

As the battle against the LTTE intensified, especially after the fall of Kilinochchi, the Tigers retreated East towards Puthukuduirrupu, taking with them thousands of civilians to use as human shields. Those not caught in this net fled South towards the Government lines. The scenes depicted here show civilians being helped by soldiers at the Omanthai checkpoint.





Ayurvedic Medicine by STF



In addition to their military tasks, members of the Special Task Force perform other services. For instance there are officers in the STF who are experts, among other things, in *Ayurvedic* medicine. These officers offer free Ayurveda clinics to villagers in the remote jungles. Here we see STF officers treating patients in the Ampara district.





Air Force evacuates wounded civilians

Winston Churchill, commenting on Royal Air Force pilots who played a pivotal role in the Battle of Britain, famously said, "Never has so much been owed by so many to so few."

Members of Sri Lanka's armed forces, not only fought a war against the LTTE but, parallel to it, shouldered much work in providing relief and assistance to innocent civilians.

Here we see Sri Lanka Air Force personnel flying in relief supplies and also evacuating wounded civilians





Sri Lanka Army soldiers repairs a bridge in Panichchankade, Eastern Province

When we think of relief-work, what usually comes to mind are images of food parcels being distributed, forests cleared for settlements, medical clinics, makeshift schools being set up, and so on.

But there is another side to relief-work, one that in many ways is more fundamental, and with long-term benefits: the rebuilding of infrastructure destroyed by the conflict so that civilians can return to normal life. The Sri Lanka armed forces and police have been deeply involved in this.

Here we see soldiers rebuilding the Panichchankade Bridge, which the LTTE had blasted when retreating from the Eastern Province.





Navy receives civilians arriving by sea at Trincomalee

In the final phases of the war the LTTE also retreated to the “No Fire Zone that was intended for civilians, so that they could use those who had sought safety there as human shields. It was only after April 20, 2009, when the Army launched an unprecedented operation to rescue these hostages by smashing through LTTE earth-bunds, that civilians managed to escape in large numbers.

Previously, only small groups could escape, some groups taking land route, while others took to the sea. Here Navy personnel receive one of the latter groups in Trincomalee





Army helps to repair Madhu church

The pictures here show Army soldiers helping to get Madhu church back into pristine condition after it and the entire Madhu region were liberated.





Navy receives civilians at Point Pedro



In their anxiety to escape the LTTE, some civilians even braved the arduous journey by sea to Point Pedro in the very north of the country. The pictures here show the Navy receiving civilians who succeeded in this effort during the last phases of the battle in Mullaitivu.





Navy assists civilians in the waters off Pulmudai

One of the more difficult tasks for the Navy when conveying civilians to safety involved transferring them from the ships used to evacuate the sick and wounded and their supporters. Since large ships could not dock close to the beach, Navy personnel had to go out in small boats, transfer the weak and suffering civilians into these boats, and then bring them ashore.





Navy conducting a medical clinic in Trincomalee



The armed forces have over the years been providing civilians free medical and dental clinics, especially in remote areas, or areas affected by the conflict. People attend these clinics in their hundreds, to see doctors and also to get essential medicines. The pictures here show a Navy medical clinic in Trincomalee





Vesak Dansala in Jaffna



To celebrate Vesak 2009, the Army organized a Dansala for the residents of Jaffna.

The pictures here show soldiers welcoming their guests.





Army medical clinic in Gurunagar (Jaffna)



The Army medical clinic in Gurunagar, Jaffna is a great help to civilians in the area, since otherwise they have to walk considerable distances to obtain medical services. The pictures here show civilians arriving at the clinic





Army helps out with religious festivities

The Vallipuram Kovil is one of the most famous and revered Hindu places of worship in Jaffna, as well as the entire country. Its annual festival draws hundreds of thousands of devotees. The pictures here show army soldiers helping with the festivities.





Navy builds a road near Wilpattu



With the liberation of the territory once controlled by LTTE, and the entire country coming under one flag, the opportunity has now opened up to resume long-neglected but essential development projects. The armed forces are in the forefront in providing technical assistance and logistical support as well as manpower for these projects.





Air Force helps to transport essential goods to civilians in the North

At the close of the war, nearly 300,000 civilians had fled the LTTE and reached government lines. They urgently needed essential goods such as dry rations, clothing, and other things. The general public around the country responded with customary generosity and provided many of these items.

Air Force personnel not only helped collect the donations, but also loaded them into planes and transported it up North.





Educational and medical support

The pictures here show the service personnel donating essential supplies to students at a Montessori school in Trincomalee, and also conducting a medical clinic in the same area.





Support for infrastructural renewal



The pictures here show the Army rebuilding a bridge that the LTTE had destroyed in Mahindapura, as it fled the East.





Army donates clothing items to civilians



The pictures here show Army personnel giving clothing items to children in Vakarai, as part of the Army's efforts to provide essential items to civilians.

