

A brighter future

Editorial

The last three months have seen enormous problems for the Sri Lankan people and the Sri Lankan state. Several civilians are caught up in the last throes of the conflict between the Government and the LTTE, while simultaneously massive verbal assaults have been launched at the Government from a range of sources.

These assaults seem designed to stop the conflict itself. Ostensibly intended to benefit the trapped civilians, they are carefully orchestrated by the LTTE and its surrogates, in a last ditch effort to enable the organisation to live to kill another day.

The arguments used to justify this perpetuation of brutality are manifold. Firstly there is the direct one of saving civilians, but what is worrying is that this demand is enunciated by those who did nothing while the LTTE was driving civilians into ever shrinking spaces, despite the request by the Government to them to demand from the LTTE that it let our people go.

Then there is the claim that the Government targets civilians. This is proven nonsense, given the much better record in this respect of the Sri Lankan forces over the two previous years than that of any other force in the world that was fighting against terror. When therefore civilians began to be attacked in large numbers, it should have been obvious that others might be responsible, and so indeed it proved, when the only agencies able to identify perpetrators of attacks on civilians pointed fingers at the LTTE. But in setting themselves above the fray, and condemning an elected government and terrorists in the same breath, self-proclaimed agents of mercy turn themselves in fact into death dealers, since they sanctify the performance of the LTTE. Thus do they vindicate the strategy of the LTTE in hanging on to potential human shields, since not only do those civilians face the possibility of collateral damage, they are also deliberately sacrificed on the altar of LTTE determination to create martyrs for its own dastardly purposes.

Finally we have the claim that the civilians may be better off with LTTE brutality and conscription, since the Government treats them appallingly too. Despite propaganda, over 50,000 civilians have understood the benefits of living under Government control, and have faced LTTE bombs and bullets and got away safely. The faces of the children on the cover of this newsletter indicate the hopes they and their parents cherish, and show why so many went through such suffering to get away from their tormentors.

And yet the death dealers amongst the international community will continue to justify the continuing detention of these civilians by the LTTE, they will continue to claim that the Government and the LTTE are equally to blame, they will defy logic and evidence to continue on the path that can only increase the suffering of the Tamils. This newsletter makes it clear that it is now time to move forward, to promote peace through pluralism and prosperity. Those who continue to destroy efforts on these lines will have much to answer for in terms of the continuing suffering of our fellow citizens of the North.

About this newsletter

The Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process, otherwise known as SCOPP, is the governmental body set up to build confidence in a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Sri Lanka. This is the fifth issue of the SCOPP Quarterly, launched to keep interested parties informed about the work done by the institution.

More information can be found on our website at www.peaceinsrilanka.org.

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Eastern Province celebrates Bringing young people together



While military operations continue, the Government has been pushing ahead with efforts that will help to ensure that peace, once it arrives, stays with us for good. This means reviving democracy in areas that have been under the totalitarian rule of the LTTE for so long, and making up for the years of fighting in which development hasn't been possible. It refers to political reforms as well, of course. But the Government is also working at a more basic level to bring people from different ethnic groups and regions together, to promote understanding and tolerance.

One such programme, which is being implemented by the Peace Secretariat, foresees the organisation of sporting and cultural events, primarily focused on young people.

Batticaloa played host to the latest in this series. Mr S. Chandranathan, the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province, dedicated considerable time and resources to the preparation of the event, an Inter-Provincial Sports and Cultural Festival, held over three days at the end of January.

More than four hundred young people travelled for the occasion, making it the biggest gathering of its kind in the Eastern Province. Twenty-six teams participated in cricket, volleyball, basketball and football matches, held at the Weber Stadium, St. Michael's College, Sivananda College and the

University Grounds. The unity witnessed between the young people sent a powerful and clear message to the entire country: 'We are a united people, living in a united country'.

The festival was declared open by the Provincial Minister of Sports, Mr M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, as the Chief Minister was called away to an urgent meeting in Colombo. Ms S. Prabhakaran, the Batticaloa Mayor, also graced the occasion.

The President of the Eastern University Students Union, Mr Parimal Modhy, and his members took an active interest in making the preparations for the comfortable stay of the visitors at the University. They appointed a committee for the purpose and their concerns transcended all barriers of ethnicity, language and regions. Students were on hand to welcome each group arriving from the different provinces. They were also received by a band organised by the Students Union.

Visitors excited to travel

For most of the young people, it was the first time they had visited the Eastern Province. They were all very enthusiastic about the opportunity to travel to a part of the country they hadn't seen before.

Kumudu, the captain of the Central Province girls' football team, summed up their feelings: 'I am so thrilled to be here. It's amazing that now we can visit Batticaloa without any obstacles. I wasn't feeling nervous about coming at all. My parents allowed me to join the trip without hesitation.' She added that the team had been practising hard for months to get to Batticaloa, and that with very limited facilities. 'Each member had to spend over Rs. 50 to travel to our grounds per training session,' she said.

The young people were also happy to meet their peers. Many of them exchanged telephone numbers and addresses, promising to call or visit later. Indeed, plans were immediately made for some of the teams to come back to Batticaloa in March for additional friendly matches. They were even invited to stay in the homes of their counterparts during the visit, to add to the enjoyment.

Another footballer, Danushka, said that her parents had actually encouraged her to participate, happy that she would have the chance to interact with young people from a different background, so that they could share experiences. She explained that all the team members were very dedicated to sports, with their equipment being purchased thanks to funds collected from their own families.

As well as participating in the sports competitions, the young people were able to see a little of the surrounding area. They could walk around Batticaloa town and, once the festival was over, they were also taken up to the world famous Pasikuddah beach for a day of relaxation. It was a good introduction to the region for them, and they all expressed an interest in returning.

Batticaloa youth happy to play host

The Batticaloa participants were equally keen to have visitors from other provinces, to show them around their home town and have a chance to talk.

The Central Province girls' football team were Runners Up to the Batticaloa side, who have been Eastern Province Champions for the last two years. All played hard on the field, but there were only smiles once the games were over.

One of the girls told her personal story, explaining how she had managed to recover her life after being abducted by the LTTE. It happened during the Ceasefire period, as she was walking to school with two friends. They were in the tenth grade at the time. Fortunately, this was only a few months before the split in the LTTE, with the TMVP breaking away and then taking to democratic politics in the Eastern Province, and they managed to escape with more than a dozen other girls. They all reached home safely and, after a little difficulty with the school authorities, were readmitted to finish their education and sit the O Level examinations.

She admitted that she had been very fortunate, as she had not lost too much time to the LTTE. The Batticaloa girl also didn't have to face the horrors of a battle situation, as she got away in time. She managed to catch up with her studies quickly, completing her A Level examinations within a few years. Meanwhile, she joined a rehabilitation centre. This provided an environment for her to discuss her situation with others who had been through the same thing, as well as offering further educational and recreational facilities, counselling and so on. Several members of the Batticaloa girls' football team were there, and she said they consider it a second home.

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- Central Province girl footballer

The Batticaloa girl is now an undergraduate at the Open University, taking courses in Political Science, Management and Mass Communication in the English medium. While studying, she is also working at the Divisional Secretariat of Sports as a Sports Officer, the first female Sports Officer in the Batticaloa district. She hopes to finish her degree soon, as she is now in her third year.

She explained to the visitors that life was better for young people in the East now. They can move about freely, and there are plenty of opportunities for them to pursue their education and develop a good career.





Sharing each other's culture

Cultural performances were staged on all three nights of the festival, at the University premises. Groups from several provinces joined in, with Eastern University students making the arrangements and providing the necessary equipment, including a beautifully decorated stage. On the main night, the show drew crowds of over a thousand, mostly young people from the Eastern Province.

The Peace Secretariat was able to organise an event in the Sathurukondan IDP centre as well. The people there were displaced from Sampur, in the Trincomalee district.

The Manager of the North Central Province dance troupe, who participated in the event, explained that they had given up their free day happily to perform for the IDPs. In fact, they were more eager about this performance than they generally are about their regular engagements, although they are a very well respected group and have won many dancing titles at national level. He said, 'We willingly came after your request because we really wanted to do something for these people. In our capacity, we were able to make them happy and let them see something they have not seen before.'

It was the first time many of the IDPs had seen Kandyan dancing. The majority of the camp residents are children, and they particularly enjoyed the occasion.

Support from various quarters

Numerous people joined in the preparation of the festival, and participated too. In addition to the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province, Mr S. Chandrakanthan, and the Eastern Provincial Minister of Sports, Mr M.L.A.M. Hisbullah, Ms S. Prabhakaran, the Batticaloa Mayor, also played an important role. As well as helping with the organisation work, she took

time off from her busy schedule to visit the University premises and chat with the visiting young people.

As a relatively young leader herself, the opportunity to interact with Ms Prabhakaran was particularly useful. The participants were able to ask about her experience and how she was able to develop the skills necessary to run a local administration while still only in her twenties.

The Eastern Province Chief Minister organised food for the visiting young people and officials, while the Peace Secretariat provided refreshments to the teams on the field. The Sports Ministry in Colombo, the Board of Investment of Sri Lanka, the National Savings Bank, the Tharunyata Hetak organisation and

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- North Central Province dance troupe

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the Lankaputra Development Bank also made generous sponsorship contributions. The participants enthusiastically thanked them all for their support in making the occasion such an enjoyable one.

The Peace Secretariat offered a souvenir to mark the occasion, the first copy of which was presented by Deputy Secretary General Mr C.S. Poolokasingham to Chief Minister S. Chandrakanthan.

Saying farewell to Batticaloa

The festival closed after three days with a ceremony in Kattankudy, and it proved to be a spectacular event.

There were musical and cultural shows, with the special participation of a group from the national Tower Hall Theatre Foundation. Chief Minister Mr S. Chandrakanthan, Provincial Minister of Sports Mr M.L.A.M Hisbullah and all Provincial Councillors were present at the ceremony. The Venerable Chief Buddhist priest also graced the occasion. More than 25,000 people were present to witness the colourful performances. At the end, there was a dazzling fireworks display.

The Provincial Directors of Sport declared their interest in having the Eastern youths visit them and requested the Peace Secretariat to be actively involved in the organisation.

Indeed, this event followed a number of other exchanges between young people. The Peace Secretariat was happy to assist with the organisation of the Future Minds of Jaffna event in December, which combined an Industrial and Educational Exhibition with stalls by leading companies from around Sri Lanka with a Trade Fair and a Cultural Show. Many thousands of Jaffna residents attended, particularly young people interested in seeing the latest technology and finding out about opportunities for training and career development. They also clearly enjoyed the more lighthearted aspects of the event, particularly the North Star Competition.

Another sporting event took place in September, this time with sportspeople from the East visiting the South. Galle played host to a cricket match on the occasion of the International Day of Peace. It provided the opportunity for young people from the Eastern Province to experience a part of the rest of the country, which most of them had not been able to do previously, due to the long years of conflict.

The Peace Secretariat strongly believes in the necessity of targeting youth in peace building exercises, so that they do not follow in the footsteps of their elders. Exchanges, in which young people have the opportunity to talk to others from different backgrounds, provide the best means of ensuring tolerance and understanding. In this way, youth see what they have in common, which is the start of building up national unity again.

Mr C.S. Poolokasingham, Deputy Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat, took advantage of his visit to the Eastern Province to also discuss educational development, in particular in connection with the Government decision to declare 2009 the year of English and IT. He met various heads of schools and university establishments, listening to their priorities and suggestions for action.



Learn and Lead

Rewarding scholarship



The second phase of the 'Learn and Lead' regional youth leadership programme, designed to identify, engage and empower the next generation of progressive leaders in Sri Lanka from among young people of the regions, was inaugurated at the Peace Secretariat in February.

'Learn and Lead' is an initiative of Sri Lanka's regional business community, implemented through the Business for Peace Alliance, Sri Lanka's network of regional business chambers, in partnership with the Peace Secretariat. It is steered by a committee of eminent persons in the fields of education, development and child psychology. Mr Jayantha Dhanapala, former Under Secretary of the United Nations serves as Chairman, while Mr Mahen Dayananda, former Head of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, is the Vice Chairman.

Much was achieved in the first phase of 'Learn and Lead'. The programme gave young leaders from conflict and poverty stricken areas scholarships to pursue their Advanced Level education in leading private schools in Colombo and other cities. The students received a full package of support, including accommodation in school hostels, clothing, funds for extra curricular activities, mentoring by guardians, English classes and leadership training.

The second phase of 'Learn and Lead', while continuing the scholarship scheme, will also include programmes to foster unity amongst young people from diverse communities within their own districts.

Delivering the welcome address, Mr Jayantha Dhanapala spoke at length on the value of 'Learn and Lead', stressing the vital role youth must play in establishing a lasting peace in Sri

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Lanka. The progress shown by the first batch of scholars, and the way in which they integrated in their host schools, bore testimony to the success of the programme, he said. Prof Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat, echoed these sentiments, praising all involved in the organisation of 'Learn and Lead'.

Business for Peace Alliance representative Ms Keshiya Leitch presented case studies of the 'Learn and Lead' scholars, explaining their backgrounds, achievements and progress since obtaining the scholarship.

One of the highlights of the evening was the presentations made by three scholars from the programme, who spoke about their experience with 'Learn and Lead'. The confidence they displayed, and their commitment to go back to serve their regions one day, was significant.

Ms Manique Mendis, Secretary General of the Business for Peace Alliance, discussed the way forward, explaining how potential partners could contribute to 'Learn and Lead' in the

future. In addition to contributing to the scholarship scheme, partners could also support leadership and skills development workshops, contribute to opportunities provided through the Youth Corps for students from Colombo and other cities to mingle with young people from the regions, donate funds to provide career guidance services, or sponsor peace building workshops, to take a few examples. She invited those present to look at the website for more details: www.learnandlead.net.

Deputy Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat Mr C.S. Poolokasingham also commented on the future direction of the programme, making special reference to the potential for building bridges between young leaders from the South and the North through the organisation of common programmes.

The evening concluded with an open discussion led by Mr Suresh de Mel, Chairman of the Business for Peace Alliance. Several leading members of the business community who were present voiced their appreciation of 'Learn and Lead', pledging their support for the second phase of the regional youth leadership programme.

With the backing of Sri Lanka's business community, the future of this programme to develop young leaders from the regions is assured. 'Learn and Lead' has plenty to show for its first year of operation, and plans already in place for the coming months look promising too. The Peace Secretariat looks forward to continuing its support of this initiative, and to working with the Business for Peace Alliance. We share a vision for Sri Lanka, a country that will hopefully soon be at peace, with the dynamic leaders it needs to develop further into a truly prosperous nation.

Empowering youth in the Polonnaruwa district

The event also provided the opportunity to screen a documentary made by Young Asia Television on an 'Education and Leadership Workshop' organised by the Polonnaruwa District Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in partnership with the Business for Peace Alliance and the Peace Secretariat, as an example of programmes that could be organised in any of the regions under 'Learn and Lead'.

The three day residential course targeted Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim youth from threatened villages in the Polonnaruwa district, including Manampitiya, Karapola, Kadhuruwela and Welikanda.

Conflict has taken a terrible toll in these areas. Economically, development has not taken place at the rate it should have done, while services provided to villagers have been restricted. Agriculture, their main livelihood, has been affected too, with farmers unable to cultivate their fields or struggling to get their harvest to market. Villagers have lived in fear of their lives, leading a day to day existence without thinking too far ahead. Security has been their primary concern, with elders concentrating all their attention on protecting their children.

Over 50 student leaders, prefects from schools in threatened villages, were selected to participate. As they spoke different languages, the services of a professional translator were provided to facilitate communication.

Held at the Hingurakgoda Rajatara Maha Vidyalaya, the course brought the young people together to share

experiences. Training programmes, including in leadership skills and healthcare, were also conducted, through special lectures and practical sessions. The course also included field trips, games, swimming and a cultural programme conducted with a lot of fun and excitement around a campfire.

One of the highlights was a special session conducted by regional business leaders from various districts. These businesspeople, led by Business for Peace Chairman Mr Suresh de Mel, shared their own experiences in developing successful business ventures in the regions. They encouraged the young people to pursue entrepreneurship as a career option, as a service to their communities as well as a means of earning a living for themselves.

The Chief Guest was Director Outreach at the Peace Secretariat, Ms Himali Jinadasa. Delivering the keynote address, she spoke about the efforts being made by the Government to uplift rural communities and provide opportunities for youth who had been affected by the long years of conflict. 'Learn and Lead' was just one of these programmes, Ms Jinadasa said.

The Polonnaruwa District Chamber of Commerce, under the able guidance of its Chairman, Mr G.M.G. Dharmasiri, made the arrangements for the residential course. Officials in the schools, Education Offices and Assistant Government Agent's Office, and members of the business community in the Polonnaruwa District, gave their fullest support to ensure the success of the programme.

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Changing attitudes

Interview with the Minister of National Integration



Following his appointment to the post of Minister for National Integration in March, Mr Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan spoke to the Peace Secretariat about his priorities, the current situation and his vision for the future. These are excerpts:

Having been in the midst of war for such a long time, I came to understand the importance of peace. This is what drives me now, trying to bring communities together in harmony. H.E. the President recognised this, and this is why he offered me the Ministry. He knows I am committed to that objective.

There is a lot to do. Those days, we motivated ourselves by talking about the Sinhala government, how we need a separate country, why the Forces are our enemy. Now we have to change everything. We need to be united. A good deal has already happened, but not everything can be altered from night to day.

One thing is that people are totally fed up with the war now. They have suffered too much. Eastern people totally rejected the LTTE. They never think about the LTTE now, other than a small fringe of perhaps 1%. Jaffna and Vanni people too. Prabhakaran is foolish. He has been given so many chances to stop the war and agree a solution, but he never wanted that. That's why I broke away from the LTTE in the end. It is also why others reject him. He won't be able to build up to the strength we had before once the Forces capture the rest of the territory in Mullaitivu. Guerrilla attacks will happen, but even that is difficult without the support of the people.

The diaspora are different to Tamil people here. They need the war to justify their stay abroad, but they will never come to fight. They only encourage the innocent Vanni people to die.

It is the same with the TNA. They speak the language of war, of extremism. They talk of genocide, shouting for the LTTE, to save Prabhakaran. It is very dangerous.

I believe in talking, moderation and partnership. That is also why I joined the SLFP. Those days, there were only three main parties – SLFP, UNP and TULF – and lots of Tamil people belonged to all. My parents were supporting SLFP. Now we have over 15 parties in the Tamil community, all with different ideas. How can we solve the problem when we are so divided? TNA will not even talk to the President. It is hopeless like that. Tamil people have to come back to the national parties, now that the fear of the LTTE is gone.

The country situation has changed a lot since I joined the LTTE. Those days, I was studying for A Levels. Government behaved wrongly then, and 3,000 people were killed in the July riots. Many Tamil people came to our village, and we gave them food and a place to stay. They spoke of what happened and we believed what the LTTE said, that the Sinhala people would kill us all. Politicians on both sides used those riots for their own agenda. But we know that the Sinhala people are not like that now. There have been so many atrocities by the LTTE, but they have never reacted against the Tamil people since then. They know LTTE is a terrorist group.

Sinhala people also accept that minorities must have equal rights. Politicians know it too. Take H.E. the President. He is learning Tamil, the first head of state to address the United Nations in Tamil. That is important. Tamil people like him for that, because language is the main barrier here now.

In the East, things are already happening. People don't live in fear any longer. Those days, if two parents met, they would speak of ambushes, bombings and arrests. Now the talk is about the children's school, house construction and so on. If there is a problem, they go to a police station, which they would never have done before. But we need to develop the area, and the North too. Work is underway, of course. I think we need a complete transformation. Only then can we have real peace.





The murderous chicanery of the LTTE political wing

The Peace Secretariat was very disappointed at the letter sent in mid February by Mr Nadesan, the Head of the LTTE Political Wing, to international leaders, expressing the LTTE's readiness to cooperate with them on a ceasefire and talks leading to a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict.

This seems to be the LTTE's only response to what has been described by Sir John Holmes as the efforts of several intermediaries working behind the scenes with all parties to the conflict to get the civilians out. The civilians are the principal concern of the Government now, working together with its international partners, and it hopes very much that the LTTE can be persuaded to let them go. But it is absurd of Nadesan to respond merely by formally requesting what it has tried to promote for so long through its surrogates, namely a ceasefire that will allow it to shore up its position.

Nadesan has evidently forgotten the history of the LTTE. Indeed he has forgotten his own history in the Sri Lankan police, for he declares that the Sri Lankan armed forces are made up only of Sinhalese. He may wish to exclude the Police, but he should not forget that one of the first assassinations by the LTTE was of the Tamil Inspector Bastianpillai. He also forgets that the first Army Commander was Tamil, and that even in the nineties there was a Tamil Chief of Staff, and that recently senior officers at the premier training institute of the Army have been Tamil. However, the threat of assassination by the LTTE makes it difficult for them to serve in the field, given that two Tamil speaking Muslim officers have been targeted of late.

Around the same time that Bastianpillai was slaughtered, the LTTE killed the Tamil Mayor of Jaffna, then two more Mayors in the nineties, after which the Municipal Council could no longer function. Nadesan seems to have forgotten that, as well as the Tamil political leaders killed by the LTTE during negotiations. These include Sabaratnam of TELO during the Thimpu process, the former Tamil leader of the opposition Amirthalingam when the LTTE was talking to Premadasa, and Tamil Foreign Minister Kadirgamar during the most recent ceasefire. Other prominent Tamil politicians killed by the LTTE include the activists Sam Tambimuttu and Neelan Tiruchelvam.

With this appalling history, what makes Nadesan think that anyone would pay attention to him now? He cannot believe the world leaders whom he addresses are fools, so perhaps he believes that they are new and that no one will brief them about what the term ceasefire actually means to the LTTE.

In order to make his case while pretending to recount the history of peace talks, Nadesan uses very strange locutions. Instead of admitting that the LTTE walked out of talks on four occasions, he declares that the Sri Lankan ruling party disrupted them. What this means is that in 1990, then in 1994, 2003 and 2006, the LTTE withdrew, on one occasion killing hundreds of Nadesan's former colleagues whom it had taken hostage. In 2003, the Sri Lankan leader was Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is generally thought to have been prepared to grant much of what the LTTE wanted, but the LTTE was upset at not having been invited to a donor meeting in Washington. During that ceasefire, the LTTE committed almost 4,000 violations, according to the Scandinavian Monitoring Mission, built up air strips that it refused to allow to be inspected, and brought in aircraft and weapons, on one occasion blowing up a shipload of them when a Scandinavian Monitor found them hidden.

Forgetting the LTTE's deceitful militarism, and its continuing murder of all dissenting Tamils, Nadesan keeps repeating the word genocide, while clinging onto the hostages the LTTE has driven before it in its retreat, perhaps planning from the start to sacrifice them to its own ambitions. Without shame, it sent a suicide bomber to blow herself up amidst people trying to get to Government controlled areas, it exploded a grenade in a bus transporting them to welfare centres, and it shot at hundreds of others crossing to safety. Meanwhile, it claims that the Government is genocidal, trotting out figures that are belied by its own propaganda outfits, since throughout the military operations of the last six months of 2008, allegations even in Tamilnet were of fewer than a hundred civilian deaths.

It was after this was pointed out that the LTTE propaganda outfits began to claim large numbers of deaths. This may not be entirely false, because on the day on which the largest number of victims was claimed, 300 of them, the UN finally decided that the firing had come from the LTTE.

These 300 people were the sacrificial victims of Nadesan's demented leader, perhaps slaughtered by accident, perhaps deliberately, so Nadesan could accuse us of genocide. This is not acceptable, and Nadesan must be told firmly that the game is up. The LTTE must let the civilians go, and also the poor conscripts who have had weapons thrust into their hands and been despatched to the frontlines. Nadesan and his leader, who lurk at the back, may fight on to the end, or surrender into judicial custody, but they cannot be allowed to sacrifice any more of our fellow citizens to their continuing lunatic chicanery.

Wrong again, Miss Hogg

For a long time, organisations like Human Rights Watch looked no worse than sadly misguided. Their intellectual capacities obviously weren't up to the analysis of basic facts, and their unshakeable belief in the fundamental goodness of humankind led them to assume that terrorists couldn't be as dangerous as they seemed, but their intentions weren't really in doubt. Lately, however, it has become clear that they must have some other agenda.

One of the most recent articles in a series attacking the Sri Lankan government, by the Human Rights Watch South Asia Researcher Charu Lata Hogg, was published in a Japanese newspaper towards the end of March. And it was particularly crude in its methods.

Lying now seems to be perfectly acceptable to these modern day crusaders. In her opening paragraph, Hogg describes in rather compelling detail what she calls the scenes of death and destruction in the Vanni. Dead bodies of civilians lie strewn along dusty roads, she says. Hospitals, playgrounds and houses stand ravaged by rockets fired from multi-barrel launchers. If Hogg has managed to identify the weaponry used and even noted the dirt underfoot, she must have a very good idea of what is going on, readers might be forgiven for assuming. Except that she hasn't been within fifty kilometres of the conflict zone.

Hogg would probably argue that this is because the Government hasn't allowed her to go, peculiarly concerned for her safety as she dashes across territory the LTTE has scattered with landmines to risk being hit by bullets Prabhakaran intends for escaping civilians. But this is really no excuse for making things up.

Readers may also like to think that Hogg is just filling the gaps in her story. They may want to give her the benefit of the doubt, given that she operates under the rather useful banner of human rights. Perhaps she got those reports from somebody else and just made a silly mistake in presenting them as her own experiences. Hogg might have checked to ensure that she wasn't just repeating propaganda from the LTTE, although it isn't clear how. It is a lot to swallow. Independent journalists would have explained that the statements were no more than hearsay because they hadn't



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seen for themselves, but Hogg apparently doesn't feel the need to meet even the lowest quality standards when pontificating to the rest of the world.

Hogg then claims that Human Rights Watch research indicates that there have been up to two thousand civilian deaths since the beginning of January. This is rather cunning, because it would be true even if none had occurred. But more disturbing is that the figure coincides with that being put about by TamilNet. And Hogg doesn't indicate how else she came by the information. Readers may now be somewhat unwilling to just assume that her sources are not connected to the LTTE. As the Peace Secretariat has pointed out before, TamilNet started inflating reports of civilian deaths after we highlighted the very small number of allegations being made, with considerably less than a hundred in the six months to the end of December.

This lackadaisical attitude with regard to figures is nothing compared to the discussion of responsibility. Hogg distributes blame almost evenly, stating that both the Army and the LTTE committed the killings. Then she subtly gives the impression that the majority were the responsibility of the Army, saying that many of the civilian deaths have occurred in areas designated by the Government as safe zones. What she doesn't admit to is that the United Nations has said that the LTTE was probably behind at least some of these attacks on safe zones, while responsibility for others can't be ascertained. It has also confirmed that the LTTE has been shooting at civilians trying to escape.

The difference between accidents and deliberate targeting doesn't appear to be clear to Hogg either. The LTTE is engaged in the latter, which is what makes it a terrorist organisation. She hides this moral issue by pretending that the Government has sanctioned violations of the rules of war by telling the Army to treat everybody in the conflict zone as LTTE supporters, which is just nonsense. The Government and the Army Commander have made numerous statements on the need for a military strategy without collateral damage.

Indeed, if not for this determination to avoid civilian deaths, it would have been possible to finish off the LTTE months ago. The Army could have reduced such a tiny area to rubble within days, as others have done in their struggles against terrorism elsewhere, instead of which it has been losing an increasing number of soldiers and spending ever more on equipment and weaponry. While accidents do of course happen, probably more often than they should because of the LTTE policy of using civilians as a human shield, Hogg has absolutely no justification for her claims of an all out war.

Hogg doesn't show any greater concern for the truth when dealing with places she has actually been able to visit. She claims to have interviewed dozens of IDPs in Vavuniya, but what she has to say about their situation has little to do with reality either.

The basic premise is that people are as badly off in Government care as they were in the clutches of the LTTE, which is a very sick joke in the circumstances. Hogg claims that while civilians who remain in the conflict zone come under fire as they run for cover, those who manage to flee lie wounded and dying without adequate medical care in hospital wards or militarised welfare centres. She says that there are few hopes for these IDPs because Government has inflicted its own atrocities on their community. It would appear that Hogg wants people to head back into the conflict zone, presumably to stand guard over Prabhakaran and his swimming pools.

Readers will have noted another rather egregious falsification in these descriptions of life in Vavuniya. Obviously some IDPs have been injured, and they are now being treated in Government hospitals. While standards may not be quite up to Harley Street, and Hogg might do well to remember that at least services are free, they are perfectly acceptable. In fact, the United Nations has praised our healthcare facilities on numerous occasions, and outcomes have long been better than in other countries with our income. More relevantly still, the vast majority of IDPs are not lying anywhere.

Hogg has not been into the welfare centres, another problem she would undoubtedly blame on the Government, although her stay in the country was incognito. But there can be no excuse for her overactive imagination this time. Independent journalists have been inside, and she could have even watched their video footage online from the comfort of her office in London.

This demonstrates that the IDPs are healthy, being fed and clothed and provided with shelter, that the children are at school, and that young people and adults are getting training to put them in a better position to support themselves when they return home. The Government doesn't allow all and sundry to run around the welfare centres, having learnt a good lesson from the jamboree that followed the tsunami, plus needing to

take additional security measures in the face of serious threats from the LTTE, but they aren't cut off from scrutiny.

The question of militarisation is getting a bit old too. Hogg pretends that the fact that the Army runs the welfare centres makes them threatening, and has a good tug at heart strings with her claim that loved ones are seen through barbed wire fences but families kept apart. In fact, all efforts are being made to get those families who happened to be separated on their way down from the Vanni back together again. And Hogg would realise that barbed wire fences are quite common in England too, if only she didn't spend so much time skulking around this country. The Army is doing a good job in what are very trying circumstances, with thousands of people to cater for, because it is an efficient organisation and has a vested interest in ensuring that the IDPs are well looked after, so that the gains they have made at terrible cost in terms of the lives and health of their colleagues are not undone.

Human Rights Watch must have its reasons for this whole deception, and for the relentlessness of its efforts to denigrate the Sri Lankan government. And here comes the final lie. While it churns out articles and statements at a tremendous rate, it claims that the Sri Lankan conflict is getting no attention in the international arena. If that were true, the Peace Secretariat could get on with its real work instead of having to reply to so many false accusations made by people like Charu Lata Hogg.

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Amnesty International bombs South Asia

Amnesty's resident Cluster Bomb Specialist, Jim McDonald, has gone on another of his shooting sprees. In mid March he sent out releases targeting both the Sri Lankan and the Pakistani governments.

The first concerned the Sri Lankan journalist Tissainayagam, who has now been charged, on the basis of a confession that a court has ruled admissible. It is therefore strange that Amnesty should call for his release, since presumably it would be highly irregular for the Government to release without reference to a court people who have been duly charged.

Amnesty may well believe Tissainayagam to be innocent, but since it has not been suggested over the last couple of decades that the Sri Lankan judicial system is not independent, it should leave this decision to the courts. If it believes otherwise, it should say so. Amnesty could also urge for a swift trial, but it should bear in mind that the delays in this case are not exceptional. Finally, since there are clear charges issued, it is absurd that Amnesty should claim that 'statements by senior governments have indicated that the main reason for his arrest is because of his writing in the Sunday Times newspaper'.

The Sunday Times, owned by the Opposition leader's uncle, continues to be published, and still criticises the Government. As far as we know, Tissainayagam's articles there did not upset anyone, and they were very different in tone from the pieces in another newspaper that seemed much more tailored to Tiger predilections, and which form the subject of the charge.

Old McDonald claims too that 'The writing and publication of the magazine occurred during the period of the Ceasefire Agreement, where the Government made a commitment not to detain or arrest anyone under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. On this basis alone, the indictments should not have been served.' It was precisely because the Tigers abused that Agreement, and expanded its terrorist activities and its arsenal during that period, that the Government abrogated the Agreement well before Tissainayagam's arrest.

In short, since Amnesty wants Tissainayagam released, it trots out every conceivable reason why this should happen. And to strengthen its case it puts forward no less an authority than its Sri Lankan expert, Yolanda Foster, who declares that 'Sri Lanka's climate of impunity for attacks on the media has made it impossible to get an accurate impartial picture of what is happening in the country.' She should read the Sunday Times.

But if Sri Lanka is attacked irrationally, Amnesty goes berserk in attacking Pakistan over the terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in which several Pakistani policemen were killed. Firstly, all this is to be blamed on the Pakistani authorities, a concept expressed in the wonderfully illogical prose that has now possessed Amnesty: 'The Pakistani authorities have a responsibility to prevent armed groups from posing a threat to the life of its population and foreign nationals. Any attack aimed at civilians, including sportspeople, cannot be justified.'

Amnesty may not understand that all governments have the responsibility to protect all people. If governments had a

responsibility to prevent armed groups posing threats, then all governments in the world have clearly failed, and should immediately be replaced by the less irresponsible denizens of Old McDonald's farm. Secondly, Amnesty is once more playing the game of terrorists in declaring only that attacks aimed at civilians cannot be justified, and twinning that with its blame of the government for not fulfilling its responsibilities.

This is of a piece with its earlier assertion that the Pakistani authorities failed to protect the right to life of civilians. Do policemen not have a right to life? The point about terrorism is that it also attacks servicemen in underhand ways that are very different from the standard risks they are contracted to face by virtue of their profession. If Amnesty does not realise that it must condemn all terrorist acts, whether aimed at policemen or civilians, it goes far to justifying the rationale for terrorism, that any servant of a dispensation it opposes is fair game.

The double standards Amnesty adopts are clear when we consider its failure to condemn the British government for failing to protect the servicemen who were killed recently in Northern Ireland. Does it really think those poor men asked for it? Does it think that the British government has no responsibility to prevent armed groups posing threats to the lives of its population, but the Pakistani government does?

Interestingly, in an appendix to its diatribe, Amnesty asserts that the 'February truce between the government and Taliban militants only served to embolden the latter.' This may or may not be true, but it comes oddly from an organisation that has been urging Sri Lankan leaders to agree a ceasefire with the Tigers, who have not only been emboldened by previous ceasefires, but used them to slaughter democratic Tamil forces whilst building up their own terrorist capacity. But doubtless Amnesty, like so many in the West, thinks Islamic terrorists are incorrigible, whilst Tigers are little lambs waiting to be cuddled.

Amnesty ends by calling on the Pakistani government to conduct an 'independent and impartial investigation', doubtless

Doubtless Amnesty, like so many in the West, thinks Islamic terrorists are incorrigible, whilst Tigers are lambs just waiting to be cuddled.



believing that without this exhortation there would be no such effort. Of course it is conceivable that the Pakistani government wanted this attack and will do its best to conceal the identity of the perpetrators, just as it is conceivable that Tissainayagam is responsible for the latest terrorist bomb in Sri Lanka. But anyone who indulges in such conceptions would be better off in the funny farm into which Old McDonald seems, with a little help from Young Yolanda, to have converted Amnesty.

BBC distortions and lies about Sri Lanka

The airwaves were spinning in early March with the claim that the ICRC had said that there was an impending humanitarian catastrophe in Sri Lanka. It was highlighted on BBC World and, apart from having to answer various Sri Lankan media outfits who called about it well before dawn, the Secretary General even had to face an interview on World Radio Switzerland, with another gung-ho Britisher.

The problem was, there was no such assertion by the ICRC. Having perhaps a more rigorous academic background than all these youngsters, the Secretary General asked his interviewer to forward the ICRC statement, and got a BBC report instead, by a certain David Loyn, the International Development Correspondent of BBC News, based on statements by Jacques de Maio, the ICRC Head of Operations for South Asia. He was able therefore to respond that it was difficult to distinguish what was ICRC and what was BBC, and certainly it seemed that some assertions could not have been by the ICRC since they contradicted what the ICRC had said previously.

The Secretary General was particularly anxious not to be critical of the ICRC, because we had had a meeting the previous day with the Vice-President of the ICRC, who had seemed appreciative of our point that the ICRC had to be very careful about what they said, since it could so easily be twisted. He cited early reports by the current ICRC Head in Sri Lanka, Paul Castella, about which we had written to him confidentially, to get back a very helpful reply that explained what had happened, but that they would reconsider the question. The more recent statements by the ICRC in Colombo have been restrained, and have not been twisted, and the Secretary General had in fact conveyed his thanks to Mr Castella about this.

Earlier we had pointed out to him a particularly misleading statement by Mr de Maio, and it was therefore surprising, after our meeting, to find Mr de Maio reported as talking what seemed nonsense. However, it seemed best to give him the benefit of the doubt, which the Secretary General did in the morning, and then got in touch that afternoon with the Vice-President, who checked and said that Mr de Maio had been misquoted. She promised to put the actual text of the interview he had given the BBC on the ICRC website, and to send it to us the following morning, which she duly did.

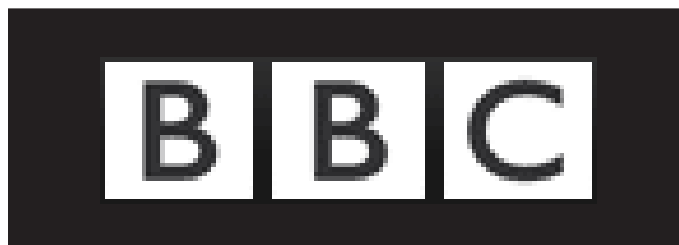
The Secretary General was therefore able to tell the World Radio Switzerland interviewer that he really should check his sources. He claimed initially to be citing the ICRC, but this turned out on questioning to be the BBC and other media sources, which again turned out to be the BBC and other media sources based on the BBC report. Thus do falsehoods spread, and unless one assumes that young David Loyn is singularly obtuse, these are deliberate falsehoods.

We have long learnt not to suspect villainy when incompetence is a possible explanation, but unless BBC standards of intelligence have declined considerably in recent years, this we are afraid is clearly villainy.

The BBC report begins with the assertion that the ICRC warns of an impending humanitarian catastrophe. All these words

are those of the BBC. Mr de Maio certainly describes the situation as disastrous, but immediately says that the suffering and death could be avoided 'by allowing civilians who want to leave to get out'.

This indeed was the thrust of his comments according to the Vice-President, as we had in fact discussed, because obviously the priority now was to ensure the safety of these civilians. But the BBC ignores Mr de Maio's words, which emphasise the fact that those who want to leave are not being allowed to do so, and instead of the seminal 'by' introduces abstract phrases preceded by 'to allow', which suggests the blame lies elsewhere. It goes further and declares categorically that 'the government has allowed in far less (aid) than is needed', which of course was not said by Mr de Maio at all.



The ICRC were appreciative of our point that they had to be very careful about what their people said, since it could so easily be twisted.

Mr de Maio talks of a ferry that regularly evacuates wounded civilians, but the BBC, with its Boys' Own Magazine mentality, says, 'In one place, the ICRC has succeeded in landing a boat to take off the wounded'.

Then there are direct quotes from Mr de Maio about the complex moral choices being made by those deciding who should be saved, whereas Mr de Maio, according to the ICRC, actually said something quite different, and referred to the priorities set by local medical professionals. The BBC however dramatises by putting into Mr de Maio's mouth the claim that 'When we reach the beach with the ferry there are exchanges of fire, there are thousands of people on this beach, they are stranded on basically sand and salty water'. Evidently in David Loyn's experience it is astonishing that a beach should have sand and salty water. This phrase is perhaps evidence that the man is actually a fool and not a villain, but it may be due to limited experience of just the pebbles of Brighton Beach.

In short, we have here yet another example of BBC distortion. In this case, having made the point that such distortion was now endemic, as part of the last ditch effort of the LTTE to use its last weapon, these suffering civilians, to halt the progress of the Sri Lankan forces, we were able to contact the ICRC and ensure the publication of the actual text of the interview. But many lies of the BBC have passed unquestioned thus far, to be circulated round and round the world by those who do not understand that integrity and objectivity are no longer important to that once wonderful British institution.

Gareth Evans returns to resurrect terror



Once again, the International Crisis Group has pronounced on Sri Lanka, bang on cue after the other usual suspects in mid March. Most negative of these was Human Rights Watch, which is a specialist, along with ICG, in purporting to be balanced. In fact, they both persist in treating an elected government on a par with the terrorists they thus privilege.

Both of them specialise in being economical with the truth, most notably by being extravagant about numbers. They also seem unduly wary of anyone who can correct their mistakes. HRW has failed to respond to our rebuttals of their claims and most recently, despite what seemed initial enthusiasm on the part of their Director, refused to meet the Secretary General in Geneva. ICG, in the form of its presiding genius Gareth Evans, failed to answer in 2007 to our detailed refutation of his suggestion that Sri Lanka was ripe for his own version of the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect.

When the Secretary General met him last year in Geneva, he affected surprise on being told that he had not responded. Neither he nor his sidekick in Colombo, Alan Keenan, has since responded to our reminders. This is perhaps understandable since Gareth actually said that he realised the Secretary General was a difficult person to engage with. In short, when they come across someone who knows more about a situation than they do, they run away - though we hope that is not the reason for Gareth finally deciding to leave ICG and his perverse patronising version of the doctrine he was instrumental in developing.

Unfortunately his organisation has returned to the charge, with the usual farrago of inaccuracies. It begins by claiming that 'An estimated 150,000 civilians are trapped in an ever shrinking space, forcibly held back by the LTTE and exposed to

It is clear to everybody that the LTTE is holding these civilians, as it did for nine long months in which the international community stood back and did nothing.

indiscriminate attacks by the Sri Lankan military.' That figure as Gareth and his crew know is contested, so to shore it up they add later 'Independent estimates from sources on the ground and satellite imagery suggest at least 150,000 people are trapped by the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military, more than the level claimed by the Sri Lankan government.' Who are these independent observers? Are they similar to the poor government official who claims today that the figure is 330,000? Is it the UN, which has in fact gradually been reducing its estimates, along with even the most hysterical media outlets that at one stage were claiming 400,000?

And where does ICG get its accounts of satellite imagery? Surely with his excellent sources Gareth must be aware that at the last meeting of the UN group that saw itself as engaged in protection the report from satellite imagery was between 70,000 (which is the Government figure) and 100,000. Why then do Gareth and his ilk simply pronounce, without even the most rudimentary attempt to check their sources?

Then, along with his friends in HRW, he talks about 'indiscriminate attacks' by the Sri Lankan forces. Surely he must know that such tactics would have brought total victory long ago. It is precisely because the Army is holding back on use of heavy weapons, in deference to the human shield the LTTE is using, that the LTTE is continuing to resist, that the number of civilian casualties is far fewer than when the LTTE used its heavy weaponry from amidst civilians, and that the Sri Lankan forces are suffering heavier casualties than previously.

ICG claims that 'Thousands have already been killed and many more wounded', which is correct in terms of the worst case scenario, that on Tamilnet, which has about 2,500 killed from June last year to now, and about 3,000 injured. The number went up dramatically in January (there were fewer than 100 allegations of civilian deaths previously), in part because the LTTE started firing indiscriminately (as UNDP has recorded) and in part because the LTTE started forcibly conscripting even more civilians, including children (as UNICEF has testified).

But ICG makes clear its main aim early on when it demands pressure to stop what it terms the Sri Lankan government's 'policy of annihilation'. It wants the Government to 'hold off on the final assault to allow relief to reach the civilian population and to make it possible for those civilians who wish to leave to do so.' We have been here before, with HRW also wanting somehow to let the LTTE off the hook. Though they clothe it in the guise of concern for civilians, it is crystal clear to everyone that it is the LTTE that is holding onto these civilians, as it did for nine long months when the international community stood back and allowed them to be tormented.

ICG pretend that they want the LTTE to release the civilians, but twin it with a surrender that involves the 'personal security of LTTE leaders and fighters guaranteed by the international community'. Why such kindness now? Why does ICG, which for years did not think of unequivocally asking terrorists to surrender, or even to return to negotiations, suddenly want the international community to guarantee the personal security of this unsavoury crew? The Sri Lankan government has pledged to give the LTTE leadership a fair trial, and has indicated that an amnesty will be available for those dragooned into fighting. Why does ICG think the Tigers deserve greater privileges?

ICG claims that '150,000 people have little access to fresh water, food, or medicine', and suggests that little was provided between January and March. This is nonsense, given the food that has been taken in right through February, a fact ICG gets over by talking about the latest delivery being the first 'major' aid. With regard to the hysteria about illness, again we have been here before, with prophets of doom predicting epidemics every month for the latter part of last year, not bothering to explain why they were wrong when, month after month, they had to report that the situation was under control. The explanation lies in the tremendous efforts of our Health Ministry, which has accordingly been nominated for the UNESCO Peace Prize.

ICG claims that 'UN agencies have documented more than 2,300 civilian deaths and at least 6,500 injuries since late January,' which again is tosh. The UN made an estimate, which was then withdrawn (although it turned out to have been leaked, obviously to ICG too), and in any case granted that in the only cases where there was certainty about the source of firing, it was the LTTE. Then there is the sweeping statement that 'More than 100 victims are arriving each day in the make-shift medical centres still functioning in Wanni, many of whom die before evacuation,' which is again nonsense, belied by the next sentence 'The ICRC has been able to evacuate some 2,000 injured and sick persons over the past few weeks'. Since the evacuation process began just about four weeks back, and since the ICRC also began to bring out the sick, i.e. when they had brought out all the war wounded, ICG really needs to study its multiplication tables.

Any death should however be regretted, as should any injury, but this should be accompanied by clear condemnation of those responsible. ICG said nothing when the civilians were driven from pillar to post over the last nine months. It has ignored the clear evidence of the Tamil Bishop of Jaffna and the UN that the LTTE has been firing into the safe zone, and instead it repeats the LTTE canard that 'the Government has continued shelling of civilian areas - including its own unilaterally declared 'no fire zone' - without any significant pause over the past two months', which is another bit of bombast since it is less than two months since the Government declared a safe zone.

It is in fact outrageous that ICG should claim that Government acts 'regardless of the cost to civilians'. More officers and men

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have died in the last couple of weeks precisely because the Forces are not using heavy weapons. It seems that Gareth Evans and his heartless crew not only want to see more sacrifices on the part of the Sri Lankan army, but insist on lying about it. Contrariwise Sir John Holmes had the decency, when told about the tactics now being employed, to remark that this meant more casualties for the Forces. Instead of even noting this possibility, the ICG declares that 'Unable to fire their weapons in a manner that respects the distinction between combatant and non-combatant, most Government attacks at this point are by their very nature indiscriminate.' This is simply rank ignorance masquerading as sanctimoniousness.

And then ICG pronounces. With no idea of the reach of terrorism it declares, 'The Sri Lankan military has already achieved its military objectives and essentially won the war.' It then comes out with suggestions that would have made sense some months ago, but which it scrupulously avoided, perhaps because it was then engaged in plotting with individuals with sympathies for the LTTE.

Now, again, the performance of ICG seems much of a muchness with that of those anxious that the Tigers should get away to fight another day. For the sake of humanity, of the children forced into Tiger ranks, of the poor Tamils driven to suicide for what ICG with superb understatement claims is a 'Tiger leadership that has become as much a cult as a rational guerrilla force', it is time to put a stop to such ultimately destructive self-righteousness.



Looking to the future

Deputy Secretary General speaks

We are gathered here today in the national interest, to discuss how to establish a lasting peace in our country, after so many years of fighting. I speak to you as a Tamil and a Sri Lankan, interested chiefly in preserving the unity of our country, a country in which all people are treated equally, where they can lead dignified lives, irrespective of any differences.

The Acehnese have a proverb that I believe is particularly appropriate in the current situation - 'There is always a time for rain to stop and there is always a time for war to end.' Of course we all hope that this is true, and that the moment is fast approaching. It would however be premature to breathe a sigh of relief. As the late Mr. C. Sundaralingam said when he attended the Jaffna Youth Conference in 1942 at Chulipuram, which is incidentally my birthplace, 'We work jointly with the Sinhalese to achieve independence from the British and, following independence, if they turn out to be liars, the war which went on for two thousand years will continue.'

As the military operation draws to a close, there are two main dangers we must avoid. The first is that other armed groups may emerge to fill the vacuum in the North and East. Secondly, people in the South may become euphoric, leading the Government to forget the need for a political solution.

Veteran journalist H.L.D. Mahindapala says that for us to develop a Sri Lankan identity, all communities must accept a single border, that defined by nature - the Indian Ocean. I believe he is right, and our task now is to ensure that this happens.

We must recognise that the Tamil community in Sri Lanka is diverse. There is a tendency to think in terms of Sinhalese and Tamils, excluding others, particularly Tamil speaking Muslims and Indian origin Tamils of the Hill Country. A political solution can only be worked out with all these groups together. It would be a mistake however not to recognise the unity that exists in the Tamil community. Years of differential treatment towards Tamils have brought a closeness and solidarity among them.

The role of the Sri Lankan diaspora must also be appreciated. They can create problems for Sri Lanka if they believe that Tamil rights are not being assured. Conversely, Sri Lanka can benefit from their support, both in terms of remittances and investment, and in terms of building our image.

I believe that a political solution needs to go well beyond the 13th Amendment. That arrangement was made in 1987, but the context is different now. We need greater devolution of power than is offered in the 13th Amendment, to ensure that there is no chance of slipping back into the abyss.

At the same time, we have to make a concerted effort to engage Tamils in our national project. In particular, we must ensure that the Tamil community participates in the rebuilding of the North and East. Tamil youth have been kept out of the nation building process while the conflict was going on, and they must be targeted now. They must be given the opportunity to contribute, particularly to the reconstruction. This includes



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former combatants, but is not limited to them, for there are so many Tamils who have suffered because of the conflict.

I believe that we cannot hope for success in this endeavour unless the two main parties collaborate. Otherwise, proposals will be subjected to the usual political games, and we will never reach agreement. Such unity between the major players in the country will also help to marginalise extremists on both sides, who will surely work to derail the process.

There needs to be a change of heart among the people and their representatives on all sides, if we are to put a stop to this conflict for good. Sri Lanka is amply blessed with a deeprooted spiritual base, and this is why I believe that it is possible.

Let me conclude by quoting the words of H.E. the President, in his Independence Day speech this year: 'As we move towards a larger freedom, our thoughts go out to the innocent Tamil people of the North who remain in bondage under the ruthless forces of terror who claimed to be their liberators. I pledge to you today that these people, who share our motherland, will be liberated and given the equality and all rights that they are entitled to, under the Constitution.' It is for the dutybearers of the Constitution to uphold the Constitutional rights of minorities, in words and deeds. He added, 'I call upon all our peoples to be united as a single nation in an undivided country, showing the tolerance, trust and understanding that have been the foundation of our nation throughout its glorious history. Let nobody sow the seeds of hatred and mistrust anymore.'

Working on the present

Latest situation in the IDP centres



Some 40,000 people have escaped from the Vanni in the last few months, despite the best efforts of the LTTE to keep them back as a human shield. Staff from the Peace Secretariat have been visiting the centres set up to look after them, to monitor the situation and identify steps that need to be taken to improve and expand the facilities. Our main focus has been on Vavuniya, as this is where the vast majority of the new arrivals are being taken, but it has included the more established locations in Mannar and Jaffna as well.

Dozens of people reach Government controlled territory every day. The first priority is to identify the sick and wounded, so that they can be taken directly to hospital for treatment. All of the IDPs are given a special energy pack, given the exhausting journey they will have made, plus a hot meal, drinks, fruit and other snacks. Others requiring special care, for instance the elderly and lone children, are also identified at this stage, so that they can be properly looked after.

The first stop of the IDPs is one of the dozen or so transit sites, most of which are in schools and other public buildings. These house anything from 50 to 5,000 people, depending on space available at the particular location.

The Peace Secretariat assessment indicates that conditions are reasonable. While obviously not up to the standard many of the people there are used to in their own homes, the facilities do not risk critical health problems, and they compare favourably with other such centres abroad. Food is being provided in ample quantities, and the quality is now quite acceptable. There is no sign of malnourishment, and mothers of young children and other special categories are being supplied with their additional requirements. The IDPs are also provided with various other necessities, such as soap, sarongs and so on, as well as clothes where necessary.

Certain amenities, such as water for bathing and washing clothes, sanitation facilities and so on, are in the process of being upgraded by Government agencies, but the baseline is relatively good.

The major health problems in the transit sites appear to be coughs, colds and flu, as would be expected in this climate. All the locations have either resident doctors from the Government health service or benefit from visiting medical professionals. Some have ambulances on site, in case of emergency, while all have easy access to such services.

The difference between the IDPs who have just arrived and those who have been in the transit sites for a number of weeks is quite marked. New arrivals have often not been able to wash for some time, and fatigue and anxiety has usually set in. Once people settle down, they appear to be doing perfectly well. Children run around with energy, full of smiles, and speak forthrightly to visitors.

Given their experiences, people are coping very well. Some of the IDPs tell harrowing stories about their escape from the Vanni, and also describe efforts over a longer period to hide from or protect family members from the LTTE. The Peace Secretariat has spoken to several young people who claim to have spent prolonged periods in bunkers, hidden in the jungle, and even injured themselves, to avoid forced conscription.

The main problem in the transit sites is congestion, which means that families have much less privacy than they would like. This is exacerbated by issues of class, with some people

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feeling uncomfortable living in close proximity, eating and bathing near those of a different standing. The Army has put up tents in the open spaces available, supplemented by international agencies, to try to relieve this problem, but it is only an interim solution. Meanwhile, UNHCR, IOM, SOLIDAR and NRC have set up additional temporary shelters in a fresh plot of land outside Vavuniya.

The IDPs are in the process of being moved out to welfare villages, which have plenty of space. One such facility has been set up, while a further two are now under construction.

The idea is to arrange these along a more community oriented format than standard IDP camps. This is inspired by what H.E. the President saw in China for victims of the earthquake. It means that the welfare villages should include plenty of open spaces and many of the facilities that would be available in their own homes. For example, each location will have a school, playground, community centre, health centre, bank, post office, IT centre and so on. People are also being organised into groups according to their district of origin to encourage the community spirit.

Some imaginative activists seem to think that there are plans to keep people in these welfare villages for the rest of their lives, to settle others in their homes. They see conspiracy theories everywhere. While the situation of old IDPs in other areas has remained unresolved for much too long, it should be remembered that many of these people could not return home because of the continuing occupation of their land by the LTTE. Pretty much all of the IDPs displaced by the fighting in the East returned to their homes very quickly once the area came under the full control of the Government.

Delays are the result of the mines set by the LTTE. While many of the surface mines were cleared by the Army as they advanced, or can be quickly, civilians cannot return until the area has been checked for deep mines. The United Nations requires exploration down to several feet, to ensure that farmers would not be at risk when ploughing, for example. The LTTE had not laid many deep mines in the East, which is why this process did not take very long there, but the Army anticipates finding many more in the Vanni.

While this is going on, other preparatory work for the return of the IDPs is already underway. The Government is working on the reconstruction of the A9 and A32. Meanwhile, the World Bank has agreed to lend money for the rehabilitation and expansion of the power grid in the Vanni, and negotiations are

underway with other agencies for funds to repair the irrigation systems destroyed by the LTTE and upgrade them to the necessary standard.

The Government is also offering training in the welfare villages so that people will go back with enhanced skills and therefore better opportunities for a livelihood. The Agriculture Department is running courses, and a plot of land has been set aside for a farm, which is hoped will contribute to the feeding of the residents as well as helping in these teaching efforts. A Vocational Training Centre has been constructed, and work has started on carpentry, masonry, electrical wiring, welding, motor mechanics, sewing and IT programmes, while there are plans to offer training in food processing and driving in addition.

Critics have attacked the dependence on the military to run the welfare villages, suggesting who knows what ulterior motives on the part of the Government. But the fact is that the military is both efficient and well motivated to ensure that the



The IDPs are in the process of being moved out to welfare villages, which have plenty of space. One such facility has been set up already, while a further two are now under construction.

gains made at heavy cost to them in terms of blood, sweat and tears, particularly the lives of their fallen comrades, are not in vain. That soldiers have been able to establish a rapport with the people is obvious from the media coverage of the transit sites, and this has been in evidence during all visits by the Peace Secretariat. Further, people who have for so long been living under the control of the LTTE naturally look to the military for assistance. While civilian staff are also present in numbers, it is usually to soldiers that the IDPs turn.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that there is a need for security. The LTTE has made it clear that everything possible will be done to dissuade civilians from leaving the Vanni. As well as directly shooting at people as they attempt to leave, the LTTE is determined to instil fear in them of being caught up in a suicide bombing or other attacks in the Government controlled areas. There is every possibility of LTTE informants being present in the welfare villages and transit sites, and the likelihood of their passing information back on people who have escaped terrorist clutches is high. The LTTE's brutal killing of several dozen people at an IDP transport point recently shows that there is a very real danger of attacks.

That controls are needed was made clear when the military discovered that family members living in Vavuniya had been sending in illicit liquor to the transit sites, disguised as gravy. Provisions are no longer allowed to be brought in from outside, other than those officially arranged, to guard against this loophole being exploited to introduce poison, for example.

Discussions that the Peace Secretariat has had with the IDPs over the course of the last few months indicate that their primary concern is family reunion. Many people left the Vanni at different times and crossed over to Government controlled territory at different places, as a strategy to avoid the LTTE, and have thus ended up in different transit sites. The process of data collection was an unfortunately long one, because of the need for thoroughness and complete accuracy, but now most of the IDPs are at least aware of where their relatives are, even if they are not yet together. Of course there are also a rather greater number of people who have family members still held back in the Vanni by the LTTE, about whom no information is available so far.

It is hoped that, once the necessary clearance processes are completed, at least some of the IDPs will be able to move out of Government care, where they have relatives in the vicinity, or even abroad. This policy is being implemented in the Mannar and Jaffna centres already, albeit with some difficulties as concern security.

The Government is determined to get the IDPs back to their homes as quickly as possible, while not compromising on their safety, and is making the best of a very unfortunate situation in the interim.



In short, while the IDPs have clearly undergone a very traumatic experience, and the presence of almost 40,000 people does lead to some problems, the Government is providing the IDPs with their basic needs and more, and prospects for the near future are good. The Government is determined to get the IDPs back to their homes as quickly as possible, while not compromising on their safety, and meanwhile is making the best of a very unfortunate situation. It should be remembered that the LTTE is responsible for the problems of the IDPs, while the Government is looking after them. This is the usual situation, although not everybody appears to have realised it.

A9 reopens

Next step for the Northern Province



March saw the reopening of the A9, the road linking the North to the rest of the country. It was a much celebrated event, with the people of Jaffna looking forward to rather easier and cheaper access to goods from the South in future, particularly in the run up to the New Year, a festival celebrated throughout the island.

The A9 had been closed for more than two and a half years, due to threats from the LTTE. The Ceasefire Agreement of 2002 set in place arrangements to facilitate travel along the highway, with both the Government and the LTTE establishing checkpoints at Omanthai and Muhamalai, just inside the areas each party controlled at the time. However, the LTTE violated the Ceasefire Agreement, on this issue as well as so many others in the half dozen years of its existence.

There was no option but to close the road. In 2006, the LTTE attacked the Government positions at Muhamalai with heavy artillery and mortars, destroying the infrastructure and killing both civilians and members of the Armed Forces. And it did not stop there. The LTTE continued its offensive in the following months, leading the Government to conclude that the A9 could not be reopened. The safety of travellers was clearly at risk, while there were concerns about national security as well.

The LTTE used this as a propaganda weapon, trying to persuade the world that the Government was to blame, and that its culpability was leading to hunger in the North. Falling neatly into the trap, a whole bunch of eager activists started to talk at length about the Government's responsibility for the welfare of its citizens.

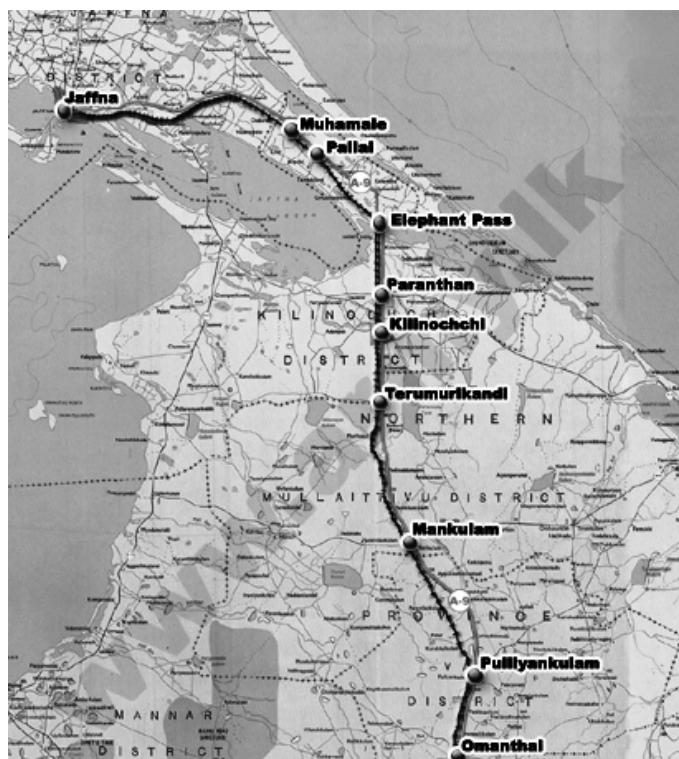
Of course the Government was doing everything possible to ensure that the road closure, an unavoidable problem, did not lead to suffering. It chartered vessels that transported hundreds of thousands of metric tonnes of supplies from Colombo to Jaffna, incurring additional costs and also tying up Naval resources to accompany the shipments.

Meanwhile, the LTTE was trying its best to undermine all this hard work, by launching attacks on supply boats and refusing to guarantee even the safety of vessels operating under the ICRC flag. Its clear objective was to generate a humanitarian crisis in Jaffna, as it has subsequently attempted to do in the Vanni in other ways. The LTTE doesn't consider the wellbeing of the people. Its own interests come first, whatever the possible impact of its actions.

These efforts were supplemented by perpetual intimidation of Jaffna shopkeepers, to prevent them from operating their businesses. This left the entire burden of supplying the people of the Peninsula with the cooperative stores and military shops, which again was designed to create trouble.

The inevitable difficulties resulted. Jaffna was not totally cut off from other markets, but its traders did not have unimpeded

The LTTE did its best to undermine this hard work, by launching attacks on supply boats and refusing to guarantee even the safety of vessels operating under the ICRC flag.



access to goods. While shortages were only ever temporary, they were sufficient to drive up prices. Indeed, traders had to spend rather more to acquire the goods they needed, given the additional cost of freight and handling through the ports, as well as the extra spoilage they had to face. The range of goods available was reduced too.

These problems are on their way to being forgotten now that the A9 has been reopened. Jaffna residents are looking forward to a rather brighter future now.

The first consignment to be sent up in March included 100 MT of sugar, 150 MT of dhal and 6 MT of cooking oil, supplied by the World Food Programme, plus two lorries of fruit. It wasn't a lot, but this was a symbolic journey. The Commissioner General of Essential Services immediately started making arrangements for the transport of further loads, with the hope of totally freeing movement on the highway soon.

Prices have already started to come down. Traders know that goods will flow into the Peninsula a lot more easily from now on, so they refrain from stockpiling products in the hope of further price increases, releasing their supplies to the market at the prevailing rates.

Speaking to the Peace Secretariat shortly after the reopening of the A9, Mr Pradeep, Director of Planning attached to the Jaffna Secretariat, explained that the market had already started to pick up. He said that they expected prices to drop sharply in the months to come. An official of a state bank in the Peninsula, Mrs Vijayakumari, suggested that although prices had not come down by very much as yet, previously scarce goods now seemed to be more readily available.

It was not only the flow of goods into the Peninsula that Jaffna was celebrating in March. The reopening of the A9 also threw up the possibility of an economic revival in the North, with the produce of Jaffna farmers now able to reach larger markets in the rest of the country.

Indeed, the lorries that carried the first consignment of goods up from Colombo to Jaffna returned with full loads for sale in the South. Onions, dry fish and palmyrah products, including jaggery and arrack, were some of the things despatched. So while the products of the South will adorn the New Year guest tables of the North, Colombo residents will have a chance to taste Jaffna delicacies after a long break.

The reopening of the A9 was also an important boost for the military campaign against the LTTE. The Government had not controlled the entire stretch of 321 kilometres from Jaffna to Kandy for more than two decades. At the height of its domination of the North, the LTTE controlled some 20% of the highway. For years, troops moving to and from the Peninsula had to travel by sea or air, adding days or even weeks to their journeys.

Of course, the Omanthai checkpoint stayed open even after the events described at the beginning of this article, to continue supplying the people in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. The crossing was not immune from attacks either, although the LTTE's interest in getting food and other supplies for its own use prevented anything of the scale tried at the crossing to Jaffna. Access had to be restricted occasionally, for instance when the LTTE fired at vehicles moving between the two checkpoints, which certainly had an impact on people in the Vanni.

The Army having recaptured the whole distance means that fewer disruptions will occur in future. Transport of materials to Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu is now under the full control of the Government, and will function smoothly once military operations are completed. Jaffna can also be supplied, and have its products despatched to the rest of the country, in safety and with confidence.

It is hoped that passenger transport along the A9 can restart soon too, encouraging people from the South to visit the North after a long time, and making the journey the other way a lot easier. Jaffna will be celebrating again when that happens.

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Debate at the UN Human Rights Council



Mr President, Sri Lanka is grateful for the concerns expressed for our situation by countries that have, while affirming their commitment to human rights, made clear their opposition to terrorism and terrorist activity. Let me also take this opportunity to thank the several countries that have helped us without ostentation in our struggle against terror.

The statement of Japan, that has never swerved from its encouragement to pursue swiftly a just political solution, is particularly welcome, since it notes our adherence to a policy of zero civilian casualties. We are grateful too to Australia, which has never hesitated to call a spade a spade, and is one of the few countries that, not obsessed by Victorian coyness and old world loves that dare not speak their name, directly names the LTTE when terrorist bombings occur.

We will do our best to fulfil their expectations with regard to concern for civilians, our civilians Mr President, whom the Government cares for, not only for the moral and political reasons we recognise in this Council, but also for the very practical one that they are voters in the democratic process the Government intends to restore after many long years of totalitarian terrorist dominance.

We have maintained this care and concern in the face of enormous difficulties, Mr President, and we regret the apparent indulgence of terrorism that invokes a spurious balance between the Sri Lankan government and terrorists. We believe it is necessary, as requested, to pursue investigations into violations of human rights as well as basic crimes such as murder, but we deplore confusion between these areas and our difficult struggle against terrorism.

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We recognise the concentrated concern of the United States on issues that worry us too, and would seek their support for the police training that has not been followed through productively by others - with the notable exception of Sweden, and some input from the United Kingdom - despite ostentatious concern.

With regard to the civilians now trapped by the LTTE, we can only reiterate that several months ago we sought support for efforts to ensure that these people were allowed to move, and found none. We have heard of shutting stable doors after horses have bolted, but this is perhaps the first known instance of clamouring that the door be opened long after the prisoners are chained and bludgeoned into helplessness. But, though rescue will not be easy, it is still not too late for a concerted effort, and we hope this will be forthcoming.

Finally, if this Council is to have a positive impact, it must work out mechanisms to deal with the behaviour of non-State parties, which already some special mechanisms have tried to address. In particular, while we have no objection to being urged to follow international humanitarian law, which we strive to uphold, with a much better record in this respect than some of our more sanctimonious critics when confronted with terror or the mere suspicion of it, we are astonished at the failure to note our general effectiveness in this regard, even in the face of consistent violations of such law by the LTTE.

We raised this issue earlier in the week in connection with the report of the Working Group on Disappearances, when certain members asserted that Sri Lanka had seen a reduction in disappearances some years back. It was however just that there had been little reporting to Geneva of the murders perpetrated by the LTTE on other Tamil groups, during the Ceasefire period when terrorism was unfortunately indulged by a Sri Lankan government anxious for a negotiated settlement.

It is precisely the type of equivocation practiced by the Czech Republic, speaking on behalf of the whole European Union, that allows the LTTE to continue to recruit children, as pointed out recently by UNICEF, and reiterated yesterday by the United Nations, which said in a statement, 'The forced recruitments included the 16 year old daughter of a United Nations national staff member'. This family was amongst the people the LTTE refused to let out in January, which makes us wonder about the ambiguous Czech reference to family reunification, and confirms our deep despair that we have not heard a word of criticism of this from any of you.

We can of course understand the silence of the United Nations in Sri Lanka in this respect, since as they explained they were nervous for their trapped workers. We are not sure however why they have not shared with the High Commissioner, and through her this Council, their belief that, on the occasions on which they could identify the direction from which firing came, it was by the LTTE.

We also do not understand why they have not shared with her information which they were willing to share with one of their European NGO partners, that satellite images indicated that the number of civilians in the safe area was at most 100,000, not the 180,000 the High Commissioner used in her recent statement. Though even that figure is too many for the LTTE to continue to hold, it does give a different perspective as regards the adequacy of the food and medical supplies the Government sends in with the support of the ICRC and our Government Agents who are still supervising the distribution - even though the LTTE recently commandeered some of the vehicles left behind to facilitate this, as expressed in a recent statement by Government Agents, United Nations agencies and NGOs, national and international, who had been working on assistance.

In this regard, Mr President, we should note that we are not carried away by this European myth about the sanctity of European monitoring, since we have enough evidence of exaggeration even amongst people who, by European standards, must be telling the truth. We too know what our difficulties are, Mr President, and we would hope those who wish to help us will at least give some credence to our own analyses, and appreciate our priorities.

Of course the perversions of the LTTE are no excuse for violations of human rights, but the corrosive nature of terrorism is too well known to many of you for us to pretend that it will not have its effect, as indeed the High Commissioner herself has indicated in an earlier statement.

We welcome assistance therefore to help us correct problems now, and look forward to much swifter progress when we are rid of the terror that all of you should oppose categorically, by putting a stop not only to funding and the purchase and conveyance of weapons of mass and even not so mass destruction, but also to propaganda.

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Ministries up for UNESCO Peace Prize

The work of the Ministries of Education and Health in the conflict areas is rarely acknowledged. Indeed, many people remain completely unaware of the sums invested and challenges faced in delivering services under the shadow of terrorism. It is therefore with great pleasure that the Peace Secretariat nominated the institutions for the Felix Houphouet-Boigny Peace Prize in February.

Given on a yearly basis by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, the award is named after the first president of the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire, in recognition of his advocacy of peace in Africa and beyond.

Education and healthcare are fundamental rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They are also essential conditions for peace. This is why the Government has not given up responsibility for the provision of these services at any time during the long years of conflict, even in areas usurped by a ruthless terrorist organisation that has threatened the very existence of the State.

The Ministries of Education and Health have invested considerable sums in the North and East. As elsewhere in the island, services are completely free. Recurrent costs, including the salaries of doctors, teachers and administrators, drugs, books, the maintenance of buildings and so on, have been paid in full, while there has been significant investment in new infrastructure as well. Rs. 6.0 billion was spent on healthcare in the North and East from 2002 to 2006, plus Rs. 3.7 billion on schools, Rs. 800 million on universities and Rs. 1.0 billion on vocational training centres. Thousands of hospital beds and school places have been provided, free of charge.

The LTTE is very adept at propaganda, managing to convince much of the world that it was running a de facto state. However, it was always totally dependent on the Government. The LTTE has provided nothing for the people in areas under its control, and it has worked hard to prevent others from helping them.



Interference has been subtle and blatant. The LTTE took over buildings meant for schools and hospitals, using them for military purposes. Elsewhere, it simply flooded them with propaganda.

Staff have risked their lives to carry out their duties. Dozens of teachers and doctors have gone missing while serving in the conflict areas. In one recently discovered case, an English teacher trained at the expense of the Government in the College of Education in Jaffna was forcibly recruited and despatched to the frontlines, while the LTTE took her salary to pay for weapons. Others have been caught up in LTTE suicide bombings and claymore attacks. Some teachers and doctors have also been assassinated, presumably for standing up to terrorism.

The recent advances in the military campaign have led to different problems. As the LTTE has forced people to move with it in its retreat, out of Mannar and Vavuniya, from Kilinochchi to Mullaitivu, and from thence into the jungles, education and healthcare services have had to accompany them. Impromptu medical centres and teaching areas have been set up and then dismantled again, to reemerge elsewhere. Nevertheless, exams have been conducted and the wounded attended to. Staff have worked as the conflict literally surrounded them, unable to get away because of LTTE cruelty.

In one recent case, an English teacher trained at the expense of the Government was forcibly recruited and sent to the frontlines, while the LTTE took her Government salary to buy weapons.

The Peace Secretariat, with the Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO in support, felt that it was about time these achievements were recognised.

The nomination was also supported by the United Nations and the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, with statements of appreciation for the work of the Ministries having been issued by several other groups as well. Special mention was made by the UN Resident Coordinator of the Regional Directors of Health Services in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu who, in constant touch with the Ministries in Colombo, have devoted themselves to the care of the people of the Vanni in the most trying of circumstances imaginable in recent months.

