

SCOPP Monthly Bulletin

January 2009

Editorial

The Government has been subjected to a lot of criticism in the international press, from other governments, amongst foreign politicians and by a plethora of local and international agencies this month. As the Security Forces have made extraordinary progress in recapturing territory lost for so many years to terrorists, all kinds of accusations have been made, from the misguided to the ridiculous.

That many of these claims do not stand up to even the most careless scrutiny is obvious. It has been shown time and again that the Security Forces are carrying out their duties with the utmost care for the people held back in the combat zone by the LTTE. Their efforts to get food, medicine and other supplies through to civilians, knowing that the LTTE helps itself to whatever it pleases, are continually rubbished, despite the well publicised facts of the matter. The most imaginative claims, such as those of genocide, can only bring disrepute on those who advance them.

A clear indication of the Government's policies in dealing with terrorism and building a durable peace is to be found in the East. It is now around 18 months since the region was liberated for good, and social and economic development work has been going on at an impressive pace ever since.

The Peace Secretariat was delighted to assist in the organisation of an unprecedented gathering of young people in Batticaloa this month, for a sports and cultural festival. After so many years in which Eastern youth have known little other than conflict, the chance to participate in such a joyous event proved very welcome. All Provinces sent teams of young people, many of whom had never visited the East before, to join in the various competitions and shows. It provided an excellent opportunity to put the Government's vision of a united country into practice.

The Security Forces continue to play a very positive role in such efforts. Another of their underreported contributions to the Government's social and economic development work is the organisation of school trips to Colombo for children from the Eastern Province. And following the massive success of the Jaffna Educational and Industrial Exhibition last month, the Security Forces have continued to be involved in efforts, together with the Peace Secretariat and others, to further encourage the private sector to get involved in the Northern Province. That these ventures go on while the Security Forces are also engaged in intense battles against the LTTE must be acknowledged by their critics.

Indeed, an altogether more balanced view of the situation in this country is long overdue. It is time for all those people who seem to have nothing better to do than launch scathing attacks on the Government to actually look at what is happening on the ground, not rely on hearsay and propaganda from terrorists.



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About this bulletin

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 first issue of the SCOPP Monthly, 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.

Eastern Province sports and cultural festival ahead of Independence Day



Mr. S. Chandrakanthan, the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province, pressed into service the entire machinery of the local administration to organise an interprovincial sports and cultural festival in Batticaloa from January 29th to 31st, with the assistance of the Peace Secretariat. More than 400 young people travelled for the event, which saw 26 teams participate in a series of cricket, volleyball, basketball and soccer matches. There were also an array of cultural troupes.

The festival was declared open by the Provincial Minister of Sports, Mr. M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, on the morning of the 29th. It was by far the biggest occasion of its kind to be staged in the East with the participation of youth. The unity witnessed between young people of the various communities, speaking different languages, sent a powerful and clear message to the entire country: 'We are a united people, living in a united country'.

The sporting events were held at the Weber Stadium, St. Michael's College, Sivananda College and the Eastern University Grounds. Matches were played as friendly encounters, and the Eastern teams did particularly well in the cricket and ladies soccer competitions.

Cultural performances were staged on all three nights. On the 30th, a special concert was held at the Eastern University Grounds. There was a large number of spectators, with over 1,000 students from the Eastern Province interacting with the visitors. The Peace Secretariat was able to organise cultural performances in IDP camps as well.

Ms. S. Prabhakaran, the Batticaloa Mayor, took time off from her busy schedule to come and talk with the visiting young people at the Eastern University.

The President of the Student Union, Mr. Parimal Modhy, and his members took an active interest in making the preparations for the comfortable stay of the visitors at the Eastern University.

A committee was appointed for the purpose and the concerns of its members transcended all barriers of ethnicity, language and region. The Student Union organised a band to welcome each group arriving from the provinces. Members were also on hand to greet the visitors.

The Eastern Province Chief Minister organised food for the visiting young people and officials, and 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 the Lankaputra Development Bank also made generous sponsorship contributions.

The closing ceremony on the evening of the 31st in Kattankudy proved to be a spectacular event. There were musical and cultural shows, with the special participation of a group from the Tower Hall Theatre Foundation. Chief Minister Mr. S. Chandrakanthan, Provincial Minister of Sports Mr. M.L.A.M Hizbullah 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 that concluded with a dazzling fireworks show.

The Provincial Directors of Sport declared their interest in having the Eastern students visit them and requested the Peace Secretariat to be actively involved in promoting these exchanges.

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Private sector enthusiastic about business potential of the Northern Province

Following the success of the Jaffna Educational and Industrial Exhibition, the Peace Secretariat organised a meeting on January 8th for the Colombo businesses that had travelled up for the event to discuss their impressions. They were all very positive about the experience, and many already had plans to expand their operations in the Peninsula.

Twenty-two leading brands participated in the Trade Fair. Most did so only with the intention of helping people who had suffered due to the long conflict, thinking of it as one of their corporate social responsibility activities. But the enthusiasm of the 300,000 Jaffna residents who visited their stalls convinced them that there was considerable potential for doing business.

The Mobitel spokesman remarked that people were extremely keen on connecting with the rest of the country and the world. He explained that this had been unexpected, so the limited numbers of handsets and SIM cards they had shipped for the event had sold out quickly. Many students had asked Mobitel when broadband internet would be available, he said.

The numerous educational institutes that participated in the Trade Fair confirmed that there had been a strong response from Jaffna youth. Many high achieving students have since enrolled to sit for exams in Colombo, and the Security Forces have promised to expedite all the necessary clearances.

Associated Motorways expressed their keenness to move into the Peninsula. Their representative said that most people had old cars and were just waiting for the right products to come along. Given the affinity for Indian manufactured vehicles in Jaffna, Associated Motorways was planning to start marketing its range of Maruti cars, he said. They are also hoping to set up associated businesses such as oil, parts and servicing operations. Associated Motorways had delayed their entry into the Peninsula not only because of security concerns but also due to a lack of information on the potential market.

Agribusinesses were also enthusiastic. The Hayleys representative noted that farmers seemed to be very interested



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in learning new techniques and skills, judging by visitors to their stall. He particularly admired the entrepreneurial spirit of Jaffna youth, noting that even a 14 year old boy had bought a packet of seeds from them to start cultivating in his garden.

DSI said that they were looking into the possibility of shifting parts of their manufacturing operation to Jaffna, as well as hoping to expand their sales. Their spokesman highlighted the availability of good quality labour, potentially at a lower cost than elsewhere.

The meeting at the Peace Secretariat brought out a number of steps being taken to further encourage businesses to get to work in Jaffna. The chambers of commerce are in the process of establishing steering committees to disseminate relevant information to their members. The Security Forces, the Jaffna GA and the Peace Secretariat are working on a mechanism to solve any problems that might come up. There are also plans to organise dialogue with the Jaffna Chamber of Commerce to help companies get a better idea of local conditions and trends. Participants suggested holding a Colombo Trade Fair, inviting Jaffna farmers and other entrepreneurs to come down and sell their goods in a bigger market.

The Peace Secretariat will continue to facilitate such initiatives between the public and private sectors to catalyse economic activity in the North and East.



A polite request to foreign diplomats

Bite the LTTE bullet



When discussing the conflict in Sri Lanka, foreign diplomats sometimes appear to have been surgically attached to a pair of rather close fitting blinkers. They seem to be completely incapable of giving up their obsession with tempering any statement critical of one party with equal concern about the other, even when such balance is not only unjustified but also decidedly counterproductive in solving the problems at hand. Both sides are urged to comply with their directives, whatever the situation.

This ostensible evenhandedness has appeared to be everywhere of late. Literally dozens of this kind of statement have been issued by all and sundry.

First to speak was the British Foreign Minister, David Miliband, who called on the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to ensure the wellbeing of civilians by granting safe passage to those wanting to leave the combat zone. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General, promptly added his voice to the debate, expressing some generic concerns about freedom of movement. The Sri Lankan government and the LTTE were asked to take care. Even the International Committee of the Red Cross joined in, calling on the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to allow civilians to leave, particularly those injured and in need of the kind of specialised treatment that isn't available in the Vanni. They were followed by the European Union Humanitarian Aid Commissioner, Louis Michel, who

demanding a ceasefire to enable people trapped in the combat zone to get out. Lawrence Cannon, the Canadian Foreign Minister, also expressed his all too vague hope that the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE would give civilians the opportunity to move if they wanted.

Both sides must indeed do their best to ensure that civilians escape the consequences of the fighting between them. But any statements on the subject ought to take account of what both sides are actually doing, and where blame for the current situation therefore lies.

The Sri Lankan government isn't by any stretch of the imagination preventing civilians from leaving the combat zone. In fact, as its spokespeople have repeated time and again, this is exactly what is hoped for. Preparations have been made to house people who do come out to the safety of Government controlled areas in temporary shelters, and to provide them with food, healthcare, education and jobs until they are able to go back to their homes. Several thousand people have already made the journey, and many others are expected to come soon. Keeping civilians in the combat zone only makes it harder for the Sri Lankan forces to do their job, and this just delays the inevitable victory. The world really ought to have understood these simple facts by now.

For a long time, ignorant people were attempting to claim that the LTTE wasn't at fault either. They suggested that civilians wanted to stay because they supported the organisation. This kind of self deception was only possible because of the deafening silence about the LTTE's oppression of people under its control that had endured for so long, particularly during the Ceasefire Agreement. Forced recruitment isn't a sign of an organisation that enjoys the support of its community, and the world might have understood the real nature of the situation and what needed to be done if better informed people had spoken out then. But things have become pretty clear in recent days. By shooting at civilians attempting to leave, the LTTE has demonstrated that it is the guilty party that is breaking international law by keeping people as a human shield.

The incident in which United Nations expatriate staff members were held against their will after staying back in the Vanni to negotiate the release of their local counterparts and the transport of patients through the International Committee of the Red Cross ought to serve as another wake up call to those who still think that both sides are at fault. Both sides didn't do that either.

David Miliband and Lawrence Cannon also called on the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to permit humanitarian aid to get through to the people who need it. A variation on the theme came from the German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who declared that the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE must declare a ceasefire to enable aid deliveries to take place.

The world has been told that disaster is just around the corner almost every week for the last six months. That it has not yet arrived ought to make the issuers of this kind of statement wonder, but it never does. Starvation and epidemics appear to be no more than handy demons to be employed when it suits their other agendas.

People would not be in any danger whatsoever if they were allowed to do what they now so obviously wish to do, which is to move to the safety of Government controlled territory. Foreign diplomats probably think it doesn't hurt to address both sides, but the problem is that these supposedly evenhanded declarations just end up reducing pressure on the LTTE.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier was the only foreign diplomat to try and back up his claims with evidence, and his information was completely inaccurate. He said that people had been totally cut off from international aid for over ten days, when the World Food Programme had sent up 59 lorries holding 800 MT of supplies that it said would last the estimated 230,000 people in need for a week just six days earlier, while the Government had at the same time despatched another 34 lorries. That the estimate of 230,000 people in need is thought to be an exaggeration is widely accepted now, with similar inflation of the numbers having been found to have taken place elsewhere. The German Foreign Minister suggested with full confidence that there were over 300,000 civilians trapped in the Vanni, for some reason arbitrarily increasing the figures accepted by the United Nations. He might like to explain where the extra people have come from, given that the 2001 Census showed populations of just 120,000 each in the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts.

The Sri Lankan government has been pointing out the fallacies in the far too regular attempts to pontificate about humanitarian aid for months, and it seems peculiar that there are still people who refuse to accept that officials are doing their best to ensure that food and medicines are available in the Vanni. This is a service that has been provided throughout the conflict, and one that the Sri Lankan government takes very seriously. Suggesting that there is a lack of will to do the job is ridiculous, and there is no evidence of capacity problems either.

Blame for the problems of the civilians in the Vanni does not lie with both sides, nor even slightly more with the LTTE than with the Sri Lankan government. It lies entirely with the LTTE. People would not be in any danger whatsoever if they were simply allowed to do what they now so obviously wish to do, which is move to the safety of Government controlled territory. Foreign diplomats probably think it doesn't hurt to address both sides, but the problem is that these supposedly evenhanded declarations just end up reducing the pressure on the LTTE. Why the LTTE can't be pushed as hard as the Sri Lankan government remains a mystery, particularly when the lives of Vanni civilians are at risk.

Anatomy of a murder

A reflection on the death of Lasantha Wickrematunge

Eighteen years ago, I wrote about the murder of Richard de Zoysa. Hearing of the tragedy that had befallen Lasantha Wickrematunge, my mind went back to that essay, because here too was an individual who was larger than life, whose political progress was a remarkable record of our political history, and whose murder raised similar questions.

I knew Richard very well, and was privy to his reasoning over the political choices he made, while Lasantha was only an acquaintance. But I was always conscious of the first time we met, in 1980, when I was invited to a policy meeting at Mrs Bandaranaike's home, just after I had resigned from the University in protest at the removal of her Civic Rights. The only person I remember is Lasantha. He seemed to be modern in outlook and, knowing that he was a close associate of Anura Bandaranaike, I wondered why he did not contribute more.

It was only reading his obituaries that I realised how young he was, that in 1980 he would have been just 22, the same age as Richard. It was not surprising that Lasantha could make no impact on the SLFP, and Anura was gradually being pushed out in favour of Chandrika. When, after the 1982 Presidential election and referendum, Chandrika appeared to over-reach herself and Mrs Bandaranaike turned back to Anura, Lasantha moved back to centre stage. One paper says he became Mrs Bandaranaike's private secretary in 1986. Another seems more accurate, claiming this was after the 1989 General election.

The date may be significant. I did not see much of him ahead of the 1988 Presidential election, when the Liberal Party was prominent in the talks to form the Democratic People's Alliance. After Mrs Bandaranaike's defeat, Chandrika made a jubilant return to the SLFP, and Anura was once more out in the cold. By then Lasantha had realised that Anura was not an effective political mentor, and he may have continued with Mrs Bandaranaike. But Chandrika would have none of him, so that by the time she triumphed in the General and Presidential elections of 1994, Lasantha had moved towards the UNP.

This was probably towards Gamini Dissanayake. Certainly I remember being told, between the two elections, that Gamini was going to start an English paper, which I believe was the genesis of the Leader, even though he was dead by the time it came out. Lasantha therefore had no choice but to gravitate towards Ranil, and his vehement dislike of Chandrika helped.

Chanaka Amaratunga wrote for the Leader in its early days, originating the Thelma column I believe, with a strange mix of witty insight and salacious gossip that found Chandrika ready meat for satire. The Leader has always used this tone, which

made it very influential in opposition circles in Colombo. Yet this was also why I did not see it as a threat to government, because Lasantha never hid his predilections. Lasantha's investigative skills were fantastic, and the paper was always interesting, in part because of its incisive exaggerations. But its long term impact was limited.

The breadth of its criticism was the Leader's strength. Its finest moments came during the UNP regime of 2002-2003, when it was one of the harshest critics of many individuals in that government. Ranil alone was exempt, and it took some time to realise that some of the attacks were part of another game, but there was consistency. The Leader was alone in claiming that the government was not doing enough to satisfy what it saw as legitimate LTTE demands. Even if to many of us this showed a failure to understand the LTTE, it was a logical exposition of the principles relied upon by the government.

The Leader had been brilliant too in its earlier revelations of the weaknesses of Chandrika's government, which perhaps explains the increasing animosity between her and Lasantha. The saddest aspect of this was the breach that developed between him and Anura, when the latter finally went back to the SLFP. The Leader's accounts of the siblings then were highly entertaining, but the aftermath shows there were no hard feelings, with the Leader accepting the need for Chandrika and Ranil to join forces against the current government.

Lasantha's trajectory was extraordinary, and suggests a volatility like Richard's that symbolises that of our politics in recent years. Richard, born into the UNP, implacably opposed to the SLFP, found Premadasa unacceptable and seemed to gravitate to the JVP. Lasantha, growing up in the SLFP, hit the rivalry between Anura and Chandrika, and ended up in the UNP. The irony is that Anura and Chandrika gravitated in that direction too, disliking the change in the SLFP, a change paralleling what Premadasa had, if temporarily, achieved in the UNP.

My hope is that there will be similar parallels in the aftermath. I have written before about how the enormity of Richard's death enabled Premadasa to rein in the death squads. Some people would argue that they were necessary, given the threat from the JVP. This idea must be understood, if not accepted, though we cannot forget how the government drove the JVP, which had taken up democratic politics, underground and into terrorism. The bottom line was that, by 1990 certainly, there was no need for extreme measures, and Richard's death was inexcusable. Inexcusable as is Lasantha's death too, there are differences in context. The death squads the UNP had no qualms about creating have not existed of late, which is in itself a tribute to Premadasa, if Richard's mother was correct in claiming that,

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shortly after his murder, they were all told to desist or face prosecution. But in considering the possible reasons for Lasantha's death, the idea that such death squads do operate cannot be dismissed. Obviously the gang that killed him was organised, and must represent some kind of policy decision.

When I wrote about Richard's death, I noted that 'The least controlled of the papers suggested four possibilities'. The opening phrase is significant, suggesting how far we have come since those days of heavy control, when only government had television channels and there were very few daily or Sunday papers. Perhaps more significant is the fact that most papers will now only enunciate a single possibility, or at most two, namely the two diametrically opposed ones.

To my mind there are four possibilities again, though again I believe two of them can be dismissed fairly easily. One is that he was killed on official instructions. This parallels the claim in Richard's case, though it became the most likely explanation, albeit there remains uncertainty as to whether it was Premadasa or Ranjan Wijeratne, and against all evidence, Colombo society continues to blame Premadasa. But in this case it is unthinkable. Apart from the President's links with Lasantha, dating back to his time in the SLFP, anyone in office would know that Lasantha's murder would be a terrible blow to a government now widely perceived as immensely successful.

I do not believe the contrary view either, that this is a plot by the LTTE to bring the government into disrepute. The charge is not as absurd as that made by the UNP in 1990, that Richard was killed by the JVP, since the JVP had been so decimated that it could not have benefited even if it had been in a position to plan the murder. But it is also unlikely that the LTTE, however well supported, could have got away with such an operation.

The third possibility is that the murder was by forces supportive of the government, who saw in Lasantha a nuisance that they would be well rid of. This is a possibility, but it requires an assumption of innocence as to political realities that is not likely in those who could have planned such an elaborate attack. After all, the Leader's mockery of claims of military victory has been exploded, and it would have made much more sense for those supportive of the government to watch the Leader going into contortions to justify its earlier idea, than to justify the entire approach of the Leader by murdering its editor. But naïveté on the part of those blindly dedicated to those in power is not unthinkable, so that possibility cannot be dismissed.

There is however yet another view that is worth considering, and which appears to be supported by the reactions of Lasantha's political associates. They are working overtime to ensure the polarisation of our society, and that could well coincide with the agenda of the killers. The government, most obviously the President but also many other spokesmen, have shown themselves keen on affirming the need for a politically inclusive solution to the political issues we face. This was apparent in the approach even of the Army Commander, who in his speech eschewed the triumphalism that a few supporters and many opponents of the government wanted. In this context, those who would prefer confrontation to compromise needed a dramatic cause. Killing Lasantha was bound to cause tensions and, precisely because the three other explanations were available, polarisation was likely.

This is encouraged by all those busybodies who think they are serving the cause of human rights by pointing the finger at

the President and the government, even in the absence of evidence. Thus Reporters without Borders declared that 'The President, his associates and the government media are directly to blame because they incited hatred against him'. The Asian Human Rights Commission was also categorical, asserting that 'Lasantha was a primary target of the Rajapakse regime and particularly the Defence Secretary'. Human Rights Watch too was fairly clear about who it thought was responsible when it said, 'The government should not take its recent military victories as a signal that it can stifle dissent.' And of course the UNP, forgetting its outrageous behaviour over Richard's killing, is trying to make political capital out of the whole thing.

Such attempts to put the government on the defensive could help to strengthen the influence of those who disapprove of the

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inclusive agenda the President has been setting. And this might lead to extremists on either side gaining in influence, which would be precisely what was sought through the murder.

The President however is not likely to be swayed. He has too the example of Premadasa, who was able after Richard's death to assert himself firmly, and put a stop to extremist agendas. As a result, he could launch into a nationwide development programme that saw economic opportunities extended to rural areas in a manner unseen for decades. The East was regained then, though the very different approaches of Premadasa's successors saw it lost again until recently.

We can only hope that this tragedy, like Richard's, will be the precursor of a conceptual change. The government should make it clear that incidents like Lasantha's death are unacceptable and must be investigated thoroughly. It should not allow police officers to think that government has something to hide, and therefore they can relax. After all, when government was accused of responsibility for all abductions, clear instructions to the police to investigate every case led to the arrest of two gangs in the East. A similar message must be given out categorically now, because to allow criminals to get away with such acts, even if they claim to have been acting in what they saw as the national interest, will not help at all.

In short, there can be no substitute for the rule of law. Now that the main danger is past, priority should be given to this. The Defence Secretary had shown the way in dealing through the Courts with what he saw as unfair criticism, and his success may well have irritated those at the extremes. National security obviously cannot be ignored, but in the long run the restoration of the rule of law should be a matter of urgency, and the police in particular should know that establishing the facts and prosecuting the guilty in this instance is the most important contribution they can now make to a durable peace.

Sri Lankan Army organises school trips for children of the Eastern Province



Despite the military operations underway in the North and the need to keep the hard won peace in the East, the Sri Lankan Army often finds time for other activities that are of benefit to the people. These include everything from sports festivals and cultural shows to trade fairs and industrial exhibitions.

One regular programme focuses on the organisation of trips to Colombo for schoolchildren from the Eastern Province. This has become possible since the liberation of the area from the grip of the terrorist organisation.

More than 1,300 children from 26 schools participated during 2007 and 2008, and the Sri Lankan Army hopes to continue its work in 2009 and beyond. Students come from Tamil, Sinhala and English medium schools, providing an opportunity for all ethnicities to mingle together and learn through their own experience about harmonious coexistence.

The trips are educational as well as enjoyable, because for most of the children it is the first time that they are embarking on such a long journey and the first time that they are visiting

the capital. It is a new and well deserved experience after suffering from the impact of decades of war in the Eastern Province. All of the students taking part in the Sri Lankan Army school trips programme have been affected in some way by the years of fighting.

The Dehiwela Zoo, Planetarium, Leisure World, National Museum and Lake House are amongst the places generally visited, along with a number of Government institutions such as the Department of Information.

Groups of 60 students come with teachers and parents, and they stay in Colombo for three days. Even the adults enjoy themselves, with many of them also visiting the city for the first time. They are accompanied by male and female officers of the Sri Lankan Army.

Thanks to the Sri Lankan Army, children from the East have the opportunity to learn that there is a world beyond conflict, and that people from all communities can live together in peace and enjoy the simple pleasures of life.