

## Paper 8

### Through the Eyes of an American Student: An Impression of the Life of Young People in the North-East Province

*by Mr. Arjunan L. Ethirveerasingam*

When I close my eyes I can still feel the cold concrete floor beneath me, still hear the sickening thump of the artillery shells as they rain down a few miles away. It is midnight and I'm lying on the floor of the Chemistry Lab of Mallavi Central College trying to get to sleep. There are about twenty others in the room none of whom seem to be having any trouble sleeping. Their rhythmic breathing contrasts with the furious explosions in the distance. The shelling is being done by the Sri Lankan Army as part of the ongoing offensive against the LTTE's positions in Mankulam, about five miles away. The others in the room seem to be used to the noise having lived under this state of siege ever since the war began. I lay awake for hours imagining what the lives of those that live in fear of imminent attack day after day, year after year, must be like. I wonder how the Tamil people cope with such stress and still function, still thrive not just in the Vanni, but in all areas of the Island. The people remain defiant, unbowed in the face of decades of discrimination, deprivation, rape, torture, mass murder, and the indiscriminate bombing and shelling of the war.

I'm a second generation Tamil who has grown

up in the United States with no personal knowledge or experience of war. Before my trip, all that I knew about the status of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka was what I had garnered from the scarce news reports and from conversations with relatives. The war and the suffering of the Tamil people seemed so far away, so distant. I'm sure that this is not an uncommon feeling among the younger generation of the Tamil Diaspora. We are caught up in the events of our everyday lives... pursuing our educational and professional goals... haunted by feelings of guilt when we hear the stories of the atrocities being perpetrated upon the Tamil peoples... wanting to do more, to know more, but not knowing how to connect with our people over the vast distances... fearful that our connections with our past, our culture, our history will slowly fade away as we age... that our children and our children's children will not know this rich cultural history....

It was with these thoughts that for six months in 1998, February to August, my father and I traveled throughout the North and East of the Island of Ceylon... Tamil Eelam. From the government occupied areas of Jaffna and the East

to the LTTE controlled areas of the Vanni, we traveled and lived with the people.

One of the things that struck me most about the life of Tamils in Colombo, Jaffna, and the East was the deep-rooted sense of fear that the people lived with every day. It is a dense fog that permeates all aspects of life. This is a well-deserved fear of the Police and the armed forces that stems from the years of human rights abuses. These abuses have been well documented by human rights organizations. In the regular round-ups that occur, entire neighborhoods are cordoned off and all persons are detained, questioned, and searched. Many are imprisoned without charges, subjected to torture, and frequently disappear. Every person I spoke with expressed this fear to me and felt that Tamil people are presumed to be guilty because of their ethnicity. In the government controlled areas of Sri Lanka it seems that it is a crime to be a Tamil. In Colombo particularly, the fear of being identified as a Tamil has resulted in many young adult women not wearing the *pottu* on their forehead in order to avoid the harassment that ensues when one is so readily identified as a Tamil. At checkpoints in Colombo Tamil friends that I traveled with went to great lengths not to be identified as Tamils because it would result in extra attention and questioning being directed at them.

Young Tamils I spoke with in the Vanni expressed their fear of traveling to the Army controlled areas. Some of them had been accepted to the University, but did not want to travel to the Sinhalese areas for fear of being arrested and accused of being a member of the LTTE. This same fear was expressed by the unemployed University graduates who were not able to travel to other areas to seek employment. Discrimination and persecution have robbed these young Tamils

of their futures.

Travel for Tamils is extremely difficult and dangerous and is avoided whenever possible. There are numerous checkpoints on the major roads and at almost every junction in the towns of the North-East. These are staffed with either Police or armed forces personnel who are 99.9% Sinhalese and do not speak Tamil or English. At these checkpoints people are made to dismount and are subjected to searches, harassment, and beatings. In Jaffna I observed a teenage girl being slapped by a soldier. The girl had not offered her Identity Card to him fast enough and thus had been slapped. She was allowed to proceed but you could see the fear in the eyes of everyone in the line. Teenage school-girls that I spoke with described being sexually harassed at checkpoints and of always living in fear of rape and murder. Those I spoke with in-depth stated that they preferred the security and stability that existed during the LTTE's governance. There is a deep seated hatred of the Sri Lankan government forces. A student at the University of Jaffna stated that the situation in Jaffna is similar to that of Vichy France during World War II when Germans occupied France and were assisted in their governing by French collaborators. The government retains control of Jaffna and parts of the East only through the use of force. The Tamil people of these areas resent the armed forces and the rule of terror that they enforce.

During our travel I noticed an area close to Trincomalee that was thick jungle the first time we passed by. On the next trip I noticed that there was some activity in the area. There were bulldozers and other large pieces of equipment along the road. Over the next few months every time we passed the area more and more of the jungle was cleared and small shops and dwellings



began springing up. All of the shop signs and posters were in Sinhalese. This was yet another Sinhalese colony springing up in a Tamil area.

Of all my travels throughout the island, the most fulfilling was the time that I spent in the LTTE controlled areas of the Vanni. We traveled to the Vanni twice. The first time with the international NGO Save the Children Fund and the second time with the Ministry of Education. During each trip we met with hundreds of people from all walks of life from all parts of the Vanni.

Since 1991 the Government has imposed an embargo on the LTTE areas of the Vanni. Almost all items are banned. The few that are not completely banned are so restricted that they are in essence banned. Medicine, food, and other life essentials are in short supply due to these restrictions. As a result, malnutrition is a serious problem as are malaria and scabies. There have also been outbreaks of cholera. The economy is in tatters due to the embargo and even when food is available the people usually can't afford to purchase it due to their lack of income. The government grossly underestimates the number of people in the Vanni and thus the amount of food allowed in is far below the amount needed to sustain the population. This results in a tremendous amount of suffering of innocent men, women and children.

Almost eighty percent of the population of the Vanni are internally displaced persons. Some of these people have been displaced up to eight times due to attacks over the years by the Sri Lankan armed forces. The vast majority of the people live in 8 x 10 foot temporary shelters that house 6-8 people. These people have lost their way of life and now have no means of support. They live on the meager rations that are provided to them through the NGOs.

In the Vanni there are no checkpoints and

there is no curfew. People feel safer than in the South, East, and Jaffna where Tamils live in fear of the Sinhalese armed forces and return to the relative safety of their homes as night falls. This is not the case in the Vanni. We took many late night walks down silent dark roads to little tea-shops where we would sit and talk until late in the evening. The only "fear" to speak of was of the war...the threat from shelling or bombing from above. The people remain strong though, and very supportive of the LTTE. Support remains strong not only in the Vanni, but also in the government held areas of the East and the Jaffna Peninsula. Everywhere we went the people would mention that this "problem" would be solved if the government agreed to the North-East's independence. These were civilians with no connection to the LTTE speaking.

It was uplifting to see the positive benefits that have resulted from the work of NGOs such as TRO, TECH, and TEEDOR. The dedication of these people was extraordinary. We visited many of their ongoing projects and saw the benefits of the monetary contributions made by people worldwide.

One NGO that stood out was White Pigeon. They provide artificial limbs free of charge to civilian victims of war. These limbs are designed and constructed locally using materials that are locally available. They have a very long waiting list due to the Sri Lankan governments' ban on the materials needed to construct the limbs. The government will not allow the rubber compound needed to construct the "foot" or the metal used for the "leg" to enter the LTTE areas. On my visit I met a five year old boy who had lost his leg in a shelling and was waiting for a prosthesis.

The children of the Vanni are at tremendous risk. They live in an active war zone. One of the places that we visited was bombed and shelled

by the Sri Lankan Government a few weeks after we left. Approximately 30 innocent civilians were killed and a School for the Blind was severely damaged. A generation of children is at risk of being lost. The war has been going on since 1983 which means that those under the age of 16 have known nothing but war for their entire lives. Due to displacement most students have lost months, and in some cases years, of schooling. Many schools have been destroyed or displaced resulting in classes being conducted outside under the shade of the trees. Schools do not have anywhere near the equipment, staff, or resources that they are due. In almost every school the students sat on the floor due to the lack of chairs and desks. The government has even banned blackboard paint. Why? One student stated that it was as if the government was deliberately trying to destroy the Tamil education system.

Another problem is the lack of teachers and the resulting large class sizes. Over half the teachers in the Vanni are volunteer teachers who have only an Advanced Level education and no teacher training. These teachers do not receive any salary and rely on contributions from parents, the community, and the LTTE. Despite all of these difficulties the teachers, both permanent and volunteer, come to work and give completely of themselves for the children. You look at these schools and see the broken down buildings, the lack of resources, the continuous displacement, the threat of bombings and shelling, and yet the people still struggle to keep the education system running. They feel that the future generations must be educated in order to ensure that the Tamil culture and the Tamil people endure.

The dedication shown by the teachers in the Vanni runs deep. One of the teachers that I met had recently graduated from a University in the

South. Rather than remain in the South or East or travel out of the country where she could get a job and enjoy the niceties of the modern world, she decided to return to the Vanni and become a volunteer teacher. She stated that despite all the suffering and the hardships of life it was better to live free in the Vanni. She felt it was better to live in Tamil Eelam and be free than to live in fear of persecution by the Sri Lankan Police and armed forces or face the discrimination that is pervasive in the South. She felt that the children needed people like her to come back and help in the struggle. This teacher is but one of the many dedicated people that sacrifice their own fulfillment for the greater good of the people.

In addition to the uplifting moments there were also the sobering ones that tore at my heart. Every family seemed to have suffered a loss of some kind. We spoke to a mother who had lost four children when her fishing village in the Jaffna peninsula was bombed by a Sri Lankan jet. In every group of children we spoke with there was a child who had lost a parent or other family member. One twelve-year-old girl described, through a translator, how her house had been bombed while she was in the front yard playing with her friends. Her mother had come running out of the house, her sari on fire, and had fallen to the ground screaming and burned to death. She stared at the ground while speaking, her eyes blank, her voice soft.

Another boy spoke about the night his house was shelled and both parents killed. The students and teachers all spoke of the terror they felt when they heard the jet fighters and the sound of shells falling. They complained of nightmares of being shelled and bombed. The teachers wanted training in ways to help children affected by war. They were at a loss about how to deal with the problems they were confronted

with as a result of this psychological stress.

The people that made the greatest impact on me, and continue to do so, were the children. In spite of all they had endured they were like children everywhere... full of life and laughter. Groups of them would crowd around straining to remember the English they had learned. They attempted to teach me Tamil, as did some of the teachers, and laughed at my feeble attempts to pronounce the words. They also taught me dances and songs and begged that I teach them songs that I knew. They wanted to know everything about my life and the outside world. They asked if I knew their relatives who had left Sri Lanka for Europe and Canada. One of the most frequently asked questions was what the Tamil people who had left the Island felt or knew about the situation in the Vanni. A sixteen-year-old girl asked me this question and was heartened when I described the extent to which the Tamil Diaspora was attempting to help. She left me with the words, "Don't forget us..."

**About the Author:** See page 103.