

SRI LANKA: CIVILIAN WELL-BEING IN A TIME OF WAR: A LOST HOPE?

**(A STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE UNIVERSITY TEACHERS FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS (JAFFNA) ON 10TH OCTOBER 1995)**

The events in Vadamaratchi, Jaffna, on Friday 22nd September, had been widely reported except in this country. In the worst incident more than 30 school children were killed when the Sri Lankan Air Force dropped bombs in the vicinity of the school in Nagar-kovil. The incident took place about 12 hours after the Government imposed press censorship on reporting military events.

Two days before, Sea Tigers attacked a supply ship returning from KKS and its naval escort. Although the Government claimed that the ship Muditha and a Dvora craft were damaged, the LTTE claimed that the latter had been sunk. On the 22nd morning the LTTE was moving the hijacked passenger vessel Irish Moana which was then close to Nagarkovil according to local sources. Shelling had also commenced that morning from the Army base at Palaly, 15 miles away.

Seeing bomber activity overhead the principal and staff of Nagarkovil Government School were in a dilemma about what to do with the pupils. In the prevailing state of anxiety no clear decision was taken. When the Junior School broke at 12 noon, the children began moving home and the senior boys remained. In the meantime a commemoration relay fast was taking place all over Jaffna for Thileepan (who went on a "rottest death fast during 1987). There was also a pandal (decorative tent) near the school over which the bombers had been active. Several children

who had come out of school had sheltered under a tree near the pandal waiting for the bombers to leave. At about 12.45pm a bomb fell among the people under the tree, instantly killing 24 children and 15 others. The pandal was said to have been slightly damaged. Several of the corpses were beyond recognition and were identified by their possessions. The injured continued to die on subsequent days bringing the total dead to well over 50.

In the meantime sporadic shelling had also been taking a large number of civilian lives. On the 22nd itself a shell fell on a house in Savanai, Thumpalai, along Vallipurakovil road going east from Pt Pedro to Kudathanai and Nagarkovil. Upon hearing bomber activity the mother asked her four children (14 years and below) to remain indoors and came onto the road to assess the intentions of the Air Force. Just then a shell fired from Palaly fell on her home killing her four children and a child next door.

The pattern of shelling, which continued for a week, was such that it took place about four times a day and at any hour, at least six shells at a time. They were fired into the Vadamaratchi area at random and were no doubt intended to vent the anger of the Forces on civilians.

With the commencement of 'Operation Thunderstrike' on 1st October around the Atchuvvely area, there was shelling into areas near Nelliady, Irupalai, Kopay and other areas closer to Jaffna town, all some way from the operational area. In Kondavil (a mile outside Jaffna municipal limits) four from a displaced family were killed by shelling. The fact that so many amputations are being performed in hospitals is a reflection of the strain on medical staff and

the running down of normal facilities. People of the area praised the MSF for their unstinting service.

After a week of maintaining that the bombing of children at Nagarkovil was LTTE propaganda, the Defence Spokesman admitted the incident. The first reports had been based on an MSF press release from Paris. The Defence spokesman however said that what had been bombed was an LTTE facility and suggested that several of the dead must have been LTTE cadre.

After the very bad experience of the abortive July military operation, people are not taking chances, and at the least sign of danger are leaving

their homes to trudge along the road towards an area deemed safer carrying their meagre belongings, and then back again a day or two later when some decide that there is no immediate danger. Incidentally, when the Army withdrew from areas which it had captured in July, hundreds of civilians who had remained in those areas were harassed by the LTTE and a few were arrested by them as suspected Army informers. The reality

is that a large number of poor people do not have any other place to go to during Army incursions.

The firing of shells into the Methodist Mission compound in Puttur, which is since late under Army control is also a cause for further concern. The shells that were fired in the early hours of 9th October fell on the mission hospital now housing old folk, killing nine inmates. If these had been fired by the LTTE as claimed by the Government, it places the civilians in a difficult dilemma when the Army advances. The LTTE has been since July warning civilians not to remain in areas which the Army would bring under its control. The dilemma would become worse as the Army now 7 miles away (with a two mile strip of no-man's land) nears Jaffna. With the oncoming rains, the situation could become intolerable for the civilians. Even if the Army takes a monsoon break merely confining itself to shelling, it will be torture for the civilians.

The Government's conduct on the question of accountability in war is reprehensible and is hardly different from that of the last Government. The main effect of the censorship has been to keep the people of this country in the dark about the sufferings of a particular section of its citizenry. Although the mainline press had rarely come out with factual information regarding civilian life in the war-torn North-East, there had been some openings in recent times to write about the people. By imposing censorship the Government has been seen to be more concerned about the public coming to know about the ugly events for which it must take responsibility, rather than about preventive and disciplinary measures to minimise civilian suffering.

The food and medical situation is now rapidly deteriorating in the North. The LTTE in its own predictable manner is not prepared to take any responsibility for the well-being of the people. Its refusal to reopen the Elephant Pass or Pooneryn, land routes together with its Sea Tiger

attacks on ships near KKS harbour, are symptoms of its total disregard for civilian interests. To the LTTE, commemoration meetings and public gatherings have been a 'Heads I win, Tails you lose' proposition. The Government, whose Air Force observes these gatherings from the air sees them as a provocation. Similarly when the tortuous sea borne supply of food

from the Government does not reach the people of Jaffna in time, the LTTE's campaign on it by crying genocide. If the people are on the other hand provided with adequate food by the Government, the LTTE then boast that they are running the civilian administration efficiently. But it is the Government's duty to ensure that they have their own agenda reflecting concern for their own people. It is this concern that would save them from playing to the LTTE's agenda.

With both sides now conducting themselves with few inhibitions regarding civilian casualties, the plight of the civilians remains unenviable.