

A land of terror, uncertainty, suspicion and death

Hope you can remember what I wrote on my visit to the displaced people of Arippu, Mannar in September 2007. They were forced to leave their land and homes within a few minutes after SLA forces entered the area but were given the assurance that they will be sent back within two or three weeks. For your information again, almost seven months have passed but still people are in camps. This is certainly a violation of their right to live in their own homes and their land.

Below I am describing another terrifying experience I had in a land of terror and death –Jaffna peninsula. I went there on the 18thFeb and returned on the 22ndinst.

After landing at Palali air-port all the passengers were taken to an army check point by bus in which all the shutters closed and covered with black curtains as if some criminals are being taken to jail. After thorough checking and registration, we were taken to the air-line office in Jaffna by another bus.

The Palali air port area is a high security zone where only the demolished and abandoned houses covered with shrubs and one could see some being occupied by the army. Though no people are allowed to enter this area in some places well grown vegetables like carrot, beet, cabbage, onion and tobacco reminding any body who knew Jaffna and of its golden soil. These are not cultivated by the owners of the land but by the armed forces for their consumption and sale. The words of the book of Lamentation came to my mind. Our property is in the hands of strangers; foreigners are living in our homes.

On our way the bus was stopped at a place for about twenty minutes. One can imagine what would be the condition in the hot sun when all the shutters are closed without any ventilation. No one is daring to ask reason for the stop or at least to open a shutter for some ventilation. One can enter Jaffna but has no right to speak or question about RIGHTS.

This is a common happening in Jaffna. When you travel or walk along the road suddenly hear a blowing of a whistle and immediately you have to move to a side of the road and stop without moving an inch. It is to make way to the soldiers traveling in a vehicle, may be a bus only with two soldiers. When there is a convoy, all movements on that road are stopped until it reaches its destination. So anybody walks or travels on that road sometimes have to wait about two to three hours. This can happen at any time without any prior notice.

The curfew hours are from 9 p.m. to 4.30 a.m. But by 6 p.m. all the roads are deserted as if curfew begins from that time. If there is somebody on the road at all, it is only a soldier with a gun. Does this mean that people at closed homes are safe and secure? As darkness spreads the hour of terror and fear begins until dawn. It is the time for the killer and the abductor. The unknown gunmen can appear at ones door step at any time during the curfew hours to take the father or the young son of

the family who will never return again. So, most of the families spend sleepless nights in fear and suspicion.

Many of the main access roads are blocked with barb wires making peoples movements especially of the old, the sick and children hard and difficult. I was aware that so many restrictions are imposed on fishing. But never knew that out board engines are not allowed. So I was shocked to see that only canoes being used for fishing and even that too only for very limited hours like from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. It is common knowledge that fishing cannot be done like other employment at fixed and a given time. Fishing time should be decided not by anybody else but by fishermen only. Even in this limited hours they have to come before twelve o'clock to sell their little catch. Now many fishermen are employed at the K.K.S harbor as unloaders. That indicates how the fishermen have become the worst victimized group in this situation. Earlier the poor people came requesting various things but now their only plea is give some thing to eat. This is a comment made by many priests.

It is a very painful sight to see elderly men and young boys with very heavy loads of fire wood, cycling in the scorching sun a distance of more than 10 k m. with wearied and sweating faces to the town to earn their daily bread.

Fr. Jim Brown, a true priest of Christ, a brave leader and a martyr, laid down his life for his people on the 20th of Aug. 2006. Knowing very well that his life is at great risk, did not abandon his helpless people leaving them at risk. Fr. Jim Brown and his companion Mr. Wimalan a father of four children are true witnesses of Christ. The terror does not end with their fate. I was really happy and in a way challenged by the brave and dedicated very young priests who work with and for their people in this very vulnerable situation under enormous difficulties. They are true shepherds who have given their sheep the assurance that they will never abandon them leaving in the hands of the enemy. The priests who had worked in Vanni district and now in Peninsula are under the vigilance of the armed forces. A week before, a group of armed men entered a mission house of a priest at night during curfew and threatened him at gun point and ordered to come to the camp near by for questioning. The helpless priest said, yes, Ill come, let me give a call to my bishop. By that time the neighbors around came out and the gang slowly went away. The following morning, the officer in charge came to the church and explained that they dont come for checking without the Police. So he asked Father whether he can identify any person of the gang came on previous night. Yes, I can was the Fathers answer. That was the end of the inquiry. Who is dare and able to move freely during curfew hours with arms? Now the priest is in bishops house due to death threat to his life.

Have you ever heard of a village where nobody from out side is allowed to visit them? On the 26th of Dec. 2006 Tsunami tidal waves took away 72 lives and destroyed most of the houses making them homeless in this village. After this disaster people were settled down in temporary huts built only for four months about 4 k.m. away from the sea. Since then they are in these temporary houses for more

than two and half years but not a single house is repaired for this long period. There are some, who have not stepped out from this village from 2006. I was shocked to hear that no-one is allowed to come into this village, not even a govt. official.

One day a daughter of one of these families, married and living else where had come to see her parents with the children. They were at the checkpoint till the parents came to that place to meet them as they were not allowed to go beyond the check point. It is quite natural that children like to run about wherever they go. So, while they were playing around one child was stung by a snake. By the time the parents arrived at the check point, they had gone to the hospital with the child. What a crime and a tragedy.

On another occasion, some priests from the surrounding parishes had come to celebrate the Church feast with these displaced families. But, no permission was given to travel beyond the check point. Until noon, priests were there and the priest from the village had come there with some food, shared at the check point and went back. Even when the parents of the priest came to see him, there was no chance of entering the village.

The Tsunami house construction project for those homeless has been stopped. The people are not allowed to go back to their houses or visit their church as the army is occupying some of them. The religious services are being held in the temporary built shed in the camp.

The young parish priest is really a good shepherd who is ready to be with his people under any circumstances. One day at mid night a young boy was stung by a snake. In such a risky and dangerous situation where nobody thinks to move out of houses for any reason, the priest was not hesitant to take the patient to the hospital on his motor cycle. Tsunami took away seventy two from our families, it could have been better if it had taken us all as well. These are the words of some elderly persons.

With the closure of A-9 road, the peninsula has become an open prison. We are not living, but surviving these words clearly express the pathetic and helpless life condition of the people there.

There are so many widows who have no way of living. Their life stories are so painful that anybody who listens to them cannot hide his or her tears from their eyes. Some children have seen their father being killed or shot dead in front of them. Some mothers say we could have committed suicide but then who is there to look after our children.

There was a mother with two children who had little bread for dinner and didn't have anything for breakfast and lunch on the following day. The neighboring family knowing their pathetic situation gave them little rice on a plate. The mother asked children to eat it but they refused and asked mother to eat it. It is wonderful to see

love and concern for each other not diminished, amidst such unbearable suffering and tragic situation of life.

These are a few experiences and facts that I got during my short stay in Jaffna. Many more pages can be written but I find it is impossible to put into words the pains, tears and cry of these oppressed people. There are certain other things, which cannot be revealed for some obvious reasons.

I am sad to note most of us who live in the South and believe what the politicians and military leaders say and hence do not want to know what the agonies of our Tamil brethren under go. We specially the leaders of the Church knowing these facts very well keep silent as if nothing is happening or do not take stand against these injustice so to escape ourselves from criticisms.

We call ourselves Christians. We proclaim that we follow Jesus who lived and died for the oppressed. Isn't it a crime for us to call ourselves Christians and to live as deaf and blind people amidst our oppressed brothers and sisters who cry for freedom to live in peace in their own land and homes? You may not agree with me but I would say this is a wiping out or slow genocide of the Tamil people from their own land.

Let me conclude this write up with words of Book of Lamentations. No doubt this would be the mournful cry of our helpless and oppressed brethren.

**Remember O Lord, what has happened to us.
Look at us, and see our disgrace.
Our property is in the hands of strangers;
Foreigners are living in our homes.
Our fathers have been killed by the enemy,
And now our mothers are widows.
We must pay for the waters we drink;
We must buy the wood we need for fuel.
We are ruled by men, who are no better than slaves,
And no one can save us from their power.
Murderers roam through the countryside;
We risk our lives when we look for food.
Hunger has made us burn with fever,
Until our skin is as hot as an oven..
Our leaders have been taken and hanged;
Our old men are not shown respect
Our young men are forced to grind corn like slaves,
Boys go staggering under heavy loads of wood.
Happiness has gone out of our lives;
Grief has taken the place of our dances.
We are sick at our very hearts
And can hardly see through our tears.
But you O Lord are king forever,**

**And rule to the end of time.
Why have you abandoned us so long?
Will you ever remember us again?
Bring us back to you, Lord! Bring us back!
Restore our ancient glory**

Fr. Terence Fernando.