

Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa

Report of a Pastoral visit to Jaffna: 11 – 16 December 2006

On 11 August 2006 the only road to the Jaffna peninsula (in the north of Sri Lanka), popularly known as the A9, was closed by the government of Sri Lanka after a full scale war broke out between the government forces and the LTTE. The closing of the main road to Jaffna carved out the Jaffna peninsula from the rest of the country. It was reported that there is severe shortage of food and medical drugs. A pastoral visit was organised by the Theological College of Lanka primarily to visit the former students of the College working in Jaffna. There are ten past students representing the Anglican and Methodist churches together with the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India. Rev. Dr. A. W. Jebanesan (Principal) from the Methodist Church and Rev. Keerthi Fernando (Chaplain) from the Anglican Church visited Jaffna from 11 - 16 December 2006. The days were spent sharing, visiting and praying with the clergy who are working in some very challenging situations.

OUR TRAVEL

After the closure of the A9 there has been no access to Jaffna by public transport. Food/military transport ships organised by the government accommodate around 300 civilian passengers whenever space is available. A private airline, 'Expo Air', takes 52 passengers per flight and flies on Mondays and Saturdays every week airfare is Rs 16,400.00 (US164) each. The journey on the A9 by public transport would have cost Rs. 800.00 (US8). The only possible way for a short visit is to travel by air. However, we were told that the air tickets would have to be booked in three months in advance. We were able to book the tickets with a help of a church member (in Sri Lanka things do work in this way) one month in advance to travel on the 11th December 2006.

We were asked to report to the domestic/military airport situated at Ratmalana, south of Colombo, at 5.30am. Vehicles were stopped by the military about half a kilometre from the airport for security reasons. All our bags and our bodies were checked by military personnel. We were asked to hand over mobile phones and told that they will be returned after our arrival in Jaffna. Then a bus took us to the airport from the check post. The flight that was scheduled to leave the airport at 7.30am left only at 1.00pm. We were told the delay was due to the military checking of bags and the flight would have to wait until the clearance was given by the air force to fly. We reached Palaly military base airport near Jaffna at 2.00pm. Once again details of passengers and photographs were taken down by military before we were taken on a military bus for about two kilometres. Then we boarded a civilian bus that took us to Jaffna. Alas! One of the big suitcases with medicines and the clothing of Rev Jebanesan did not travel with us on the plane. We came to know the dilemma only after our arrival in Jaffna. It was a good experience for Fr. Jebi. He said that the missing bags gave him a chance to live a little of the life of a refugee in Jaffna. He had to depend on others for items such as clothes and a tooth brush, and borrowed these from different clergy friends until the bags arrived after two days.

In the season of Christmas we felt a little like Santa Claus; not with cake and toys but with food items needed for the very existence of the people - much more like the traditional story told about St. Nicholas who gave gifts to the needy.



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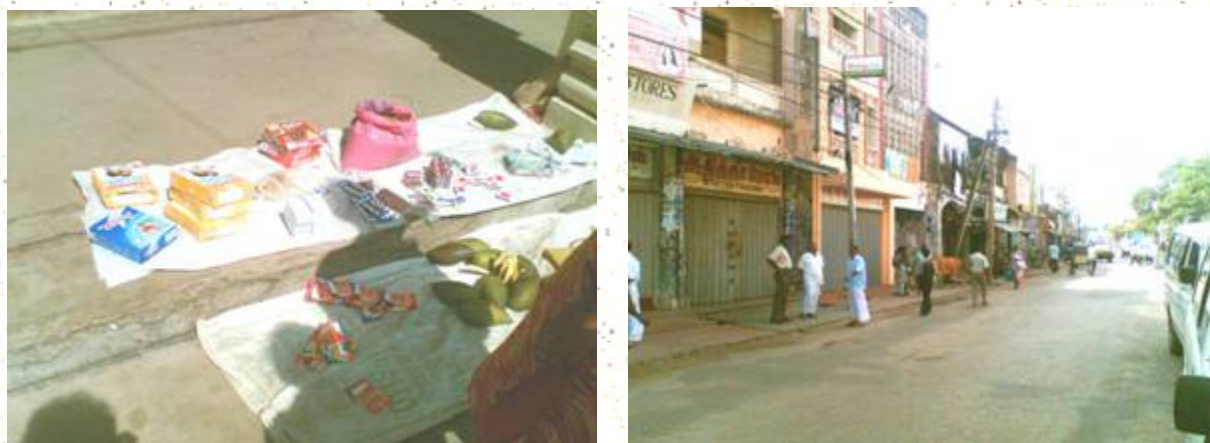
WHAT WE TOOK



Passengers traveling to Colombo waiting to be transported to the military airbase at Palaly, Jaffna

Once the travel plan to Jaffna was arranged we contacted the former past students to let us know what food and medical drugs were needed. It was a very ambitious request knowing that our baggage allowance was only 20kg per person. We decided to carry our personal clothing in the hand luggage and for the baggage allowance to buy things needed for the people in Jaffna. We thought we could take 40kg of items. We received telephone calls requesting items needed, not only for the families of the clergy, but for the members of their churches, refugees in camps, neighbours, etc. It was too much for us to handle but we tried our best. We ended up with two big suitcases of food stuffs and drugs. When we went to the check in counter at the airport and put the suitcases on the weighing scale it showed 85kg. The person in the counter looked at both of us with a big question mark in his face and said “Fathers, you are trying to carry things allowed for four passengers”. After much gentle discussion, we persuaded the check-in staff to accept our bags without any extra payment. The following common items were requested by the clergy: 1) normal milk powder/infant milk 2) washing powder/ soap 3) bathing soap/ shampoo 4) Paracetamol tablets 5) tea and coffee powder, and 6) drugs regularly used by patients with diabetes, heart problems, hypertension, and asthma.

WHAT WE SAW, HEARD AND EXPERIENCED



Most of the shops in Jaffna are closed, but we saw here and there on the pavements vendors selling small quantities of necessities at high rate. The closure of the A-9 road at this point has prevented the supply of food from the Wannai, an area south of Jaffna and Colombo. Rice is sold in the black market at Rs. 180 a kilo whereas the price in Colombo is Rs. 36. Sugar, which is sold at Rs. 58 a kilo in Colombo is sold at Rs. 400 in the Jaffna. A 450 gram packet of milk powder which is less than Rs. 160 in Colombo is sold at Rs. 300.

As we travelled to visit our past students of the Theological College of Lanka, we noticed that almost all the grocery shops and restaurants were half opened or closed. The few people who were on the road had tired and anxious faces as there was very little business. It was very evident that people generally were more worried about their survival rather than the ways to find a lasting solution for the unsolved crisis in the country. A daily curfew was imposed from 8.00pm – 6.00am. Although the official curfew began at 8.00pm people were dead scared to come to the road after 6.30 or 7.00pm. We realised that this was



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directly connected to the increasing list of missing people including some clergy persons. We could observe the anxiety of people from the way in which Archdeacon Nesakumar reprimanded Keerthi one day when he returned home at 7.00pm.

“Queue culture” was a visible and inescapable reality in Jaffna. We saw big queues in front of bakeries for bread, co-operative shops for rice, petrol stations for kerosene, and local army camps to get military clearance to travel to Colombo. There was a big queue in one road for seats to travel by ship to Colombo. Another reality, which created trauma and distress to the people in Jaffna, was the sound of shelling every night, which often vibrated the door and windows of the buildings.

At Point Pedro a group of poor young widows who had lost their husbands as a result of this conflict looked up to us as a sign of hope to come out of their troubles and tribulations. When Keerthi was asked to speak to them he felt inadequate to address them. The only thing he could say was that he is in solidarity with them and that he apologised unconditionally for what had happened to their husbands. Although Jebi was concerned about what has happened to them, Keerthi noticed that for some reason it was easier for Jebi to speak to them. Keerthi left that place with a guilty heart not knowing what is his responsibility towards this group of people who are supposed to be citizens of our country Sri Lanka.

All the people we met in Jaffna were talking about the food and drug shortage and closure of the A9 road. Some people were complaining about lack of infant food for children. Others talked about loss of job and income. The closure of the A9 road has put civilians under enormous pressure. Civilian life has come to a standstill without any forward movement. Various hardships have emerged due to the present war. For example, we were told about the procedure to get military clearance to travel out of Jaffna by air or sea. First, a person living in any part in the Jaffna peninsula must travel to the Military Civil Affairs Office situated in the Jaffna town to obtain a so-called ‘clearance form’. The purpose of the procedure is to make sure that the person travelling out of Jaffna is not in any way connected to the militants. Second, the collected form must be certified by the local village officer (Grama Sevaka). Third, it must be endorsed by the local government administrator (Assistant Government Agent). Fourth, the local army post situated in the village or town of the applicant must give clearance, and fifth, this form must be taken back to the Civil Affairs

Office in Jaffna. This takes about two weeks. The passenger has to visit the Military Civil Affairs Office on a daily basis to find out whether he/she has got the clearance from the military.

We also met the resident Buddhist monk in Jaffna. He too expressed frustration as a monk working in the war zone for the last number of years. He said that he is confined to his residence within the high security zone with the military personnel. He told us that his job is to do the religious observances of the army personnel. He told us that a few Tamil people came to worship in the Buddhist temple before the war broke out.

We experienced the frustration and hopelessness of the general population in Jaffna. People seemed to be becoming indifferent to a negotiated settlement, such is the exhaustion. However, we heard Christmas carol practices in all the churches in Jaffna, looking forward to the birth of Christ in the midst of war. One of the past students, Revd Nesakumar, Archdeacon of the Anglican Church, gave us a modified Christmas song and requested us to share it among others in Sri Lanka.

O broken town of Jaffna
Your people long for peace,
but curfews, raids and closure barricades
have brought them to their knees.
Yet still they strive for justice and still they make their stand,
their hopes and fears echo down the years,
Come heal this bleeding land.

O holy star of Bethlehem
help us to watch and pray.
With love and light illuminate the night,
reveal the Kingdom's day.
Lord, dare us to be angels, Your awesome truth to tell.
It must be heard; You are the final word,
our Lord, Emmanuel.

We returned to Pilimatalawa with heavy hearts and unanswered questions, but with the hope that God has the whole world in his hands. We share this report with you with the request to remember all the ministers, churches and the people in Jaffna in your prayers, and to provide any possible assistance you can to alleviate the suffering.

A REFLECTION

This journey enabled both of us who belong to two ethnic groups called Sinhala and Tamil, who have been having this ethnic conflict for over 3 decades, to have an exposure to experience the struggles faced by the people in Jaffna. It was interesting to note how people related and responded to us during this expedition. Many people thought we were two clergy persons probably belonging to the Tamil ethnic group who have some permanent interests in Jaffna. But when many of them came to know that we belong to the Tamil and Sinhala ethnic groups they were interested to talking to us. We could notice the change of tone and attitude of many army personnel at checkpoints as they realised that Keerthi was a Sinhala person. Often they had a friendly chat with Keerthi and wanted to know what brought him to Jaffna. Some of them were keen to know why Keerthi was not frightened to visit Jaffna after the information given through the media.

In Jaffna especially it was easy for us to relate to Methodists and Anglican clergy, as most of them are either our friends or were students at the Theological College of Lanka. Both of us could make a journey of this nature most probably because of the friendship and trust we developed over a decade as lecturers at the same Theological College. As we visited our colleagues and past students all of us felt that it was like a family reunion. This warm atmosphere at times enabled us to deviate from the hardships faced by the people in Jaffna for a moment to enrich each other on various issues in Sri Lanka and abroad. We thank the Theological College of Lanka, the Methodist Church at Collpity and other friends who made this visit possible and meaningful.