

TAMIL INFORMATION CENTRE

INCIDENTS FROM 21ST JULY, 1983.

1.0 EARLIER REPORTS

1.1 We have been reporting on the pogroms against the Tamil people in Sri Lanka by "Sinhalese people" and the Security forces of the Sri Lankan Government. Over thousand Tamils were killed. 53 Political Prisoners were massacred and thousands of Tamil homes and business places were destroyed and burnt.

1.2 There had been a continuous "invasion" of Sinhalese people into the Batticaloa District believed to be led by Mr. Nelson, M.P. for Polonnaruwa. They are now "occupying" the villages of "Vadamunai" "Madavanai" and "Kallichchi" in the Batticaloa District.

1.3 The aggressive mass colonisation is continuing in Trincomalee and Batticaloa close to the River Basin, without being checked by the government authorities. The present activities in the Eastern Province by the agents of the Government appears to instil fear and to drive the Tamils out of the District.

2.0 TRINCOMALEE

2.1 The "invasion" which started in the last week of September is continuing at Pankulam. The tents supplied by foreign countries to house the Tamil refugees who are victims of the July 1983 pogrom are now being used by the Sinhalese "invaders" at Pankulam.

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2.2 It will be recalled that in Batticaloa about 3000 tents supplied by some foreign country for the use of Tamil refugees are being used by the Sinhalese colonists.

2.3 A fresh clash between the Sinhalese people and the Tamils in Pankulam last week was reported, but the details are not yet known.

3.0 BATTICALOA

3.1 The "invaders" of Batticaloa who have come from the 4th or 5th of September 1983 have not been evicted. But on the contrary the Government is in full alert on any encroachment by the Tamil Refugees in the Northern and Eastern Provinces and the Government Agents have been directed to take stringent preventive measures against the Tamil settlement in their homelands.

3.2 By this mass colonisation about 900 Tamil and Muslim families had to evacuate from the areas where the "invaders" have forcibly occupied. These Tamil and Muslim families have taken shelter as refugees in Batticaloa. It is also reported that Sinhalese persons are selected by advertisements in the Sinhalese newspapers followed by interviews to settle down in the under mentioned areas.

3.3 It is reported that the "invaders" of "Vadamunai", "Madavanai" and "Kallichchi" sponsored by the agents of the Government have started cultivation in those areas on a permanent basis.

3.4 After the escape of some prisoners from the Batticaloa jail the Security forces terrorised and harassed the innocent people under the pretext of "search" or "manhunt". This has resulted in renewed tension in Batticaloa.

3.5 The office of Gandhiyam Society in Batticaloa was ransacked and the employees harassed by the Armed Forces.

3.6 It will be recalled that the Gandhiyam Society was involved in Rehabilitating the Tamil Refugees displaced and made homeless in the 1977 and 1981 pogroms. The Gandhiyam Society in Vavuniya and Trincomalee have been completely destroyed by the Security Forces and its Secretary Dr. S.Rajasunderam was killed on the 27th July 1983 in the Welikade Prison.

4.0 VAVUNIYA

4.1 The Government has set up Joint Services Special Operation Command headed by Rear Admiral Asoka Silva to forcibly evict the Tamil refugees settled in Vavuniya by the Gandhiyam Society. These refugees are victims of 1977 and 1981 pogroms and are consisting mainly of plantation Tamils. The fate of these plantation Tamil families settled in Vavuniya are not known. It is feared that the Government may acquire the cleared lands from these plantation Tamils and alienate them to Sinhalese people.

4.2 It will be recalled that most of the refugees settlements carried out by the Gandhiyam Society has been aided and supported by the International Aiding Agencies such as, NOVIB (Holland), Oxfam(England), Bread for the World (Germany), National Christian Council, World Council of Churches and Christian Aid.

5.0 JAFFNA

5.1 The Government has decided to send a special Police Strike Unit to the Northern Province to prevent the occurrence of any violence.

5.2 This move has aggravated the fear of the Tamils of this area that in the event of another eruption of violence, they are bound to face again a genocidal massacre by the army.

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6.0 GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA

6.1 The Government of Sri Lanka is making arrangements to spend over 40 million rupees (over one million Sterling Pounds) to engage the world's best Public Relations Company to project Sri Lanka's image as a paradise, to hide thereby the gross violations of Human Rights and other atrocities committed against the Tamils.

6.2 It should be noted that this large sum of money could be used for the more constructive and better deserved purpose of rehabilitating the Tamil refugees who are rendered destitutes after the July 1983 pogrom.

7.0 WARNING

7.1 We suggest that Governments giving aid to the Sri Lankan Government for the rehabilitation of Tamil Refugees take steps to ensure that the aid is channelled towards the purpose for which it is given.



INFORMATION OFFICER.

Newsround

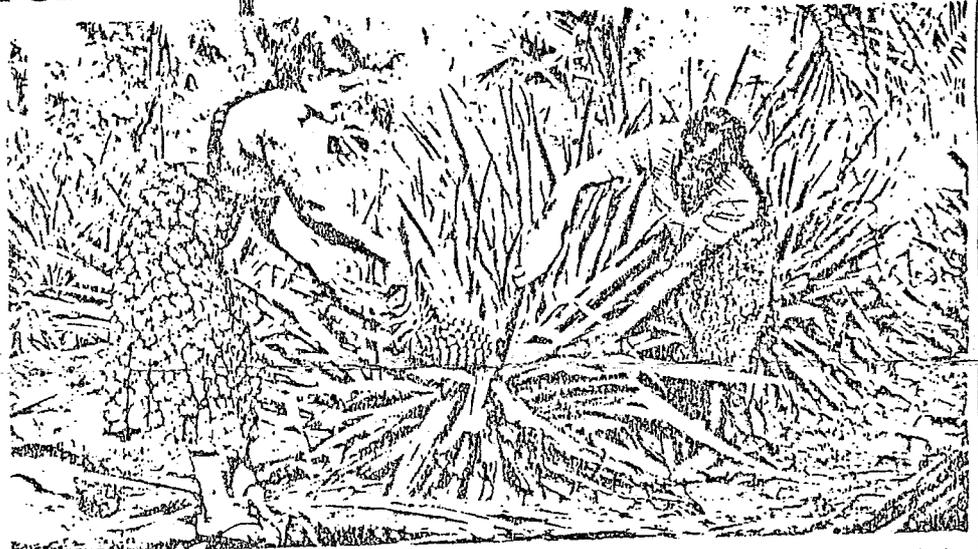
Horror and Hope in Sri Lanka

Rioting mobs, looters, petrol bombs and even murder were all things VSO volunteers in Sri Lanka had to face during the riots there. Yet despite this and on occasion facing personal danger, they have a renewed commitment to the country. John Palmer, Programme Management Officer for Sri Lanka in London describes the situation. Len Putman and Mark Holton, volunteers, tell their stories.

IN JULY Sri Lanka suffered its worst communal riots in its recent history, in which the majority Sinhalese population attacked and destroyed many of the houses and businesses of the minority Tamil population living in Sinhalese areas. In the process, large parts of towns such as Colombo, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Badulla were burnt down, over 75,000 people were made refugees in Colombo alone, and the official death toll was over 200 people. The northern and eastern parts of the country in which the majority of the population are Tamils were relatively quiet.

Problem

This is the latest of a long series of riots or 'insurrections' which have occurred since Sri Lanka became an independent state in 1948. The problem goes back to when both Sinhalese and Tamil states existed side by side on the island. It is fuelled by a religious divide, a feeling by the majority Sinhalese that Tamils were and still are over-achievers in the educational and economic fields and a feeling of being threatened by the 40 million Tamils living in South India. The Tamils for their part feel that since independence they have been discriminated against economically and politically, and their rights restricted. This has led to the growth of a secessionist terrorist group, 'The Tigers', the demand for a separate Tamil state, Eelam, and the gradual acceptance of



Peaceful times in Sri Lanka - woman harvesting pineapples.

Photo: Jeremy Hartley

separatist ideas by the more moderate Tamil leaders. During this year the pressure on these fronts has been growing. The incident which sparked the rioting — the detonating of a land-mine under 13 Sinhalese soldiers — was just one in a long line of such incidents.

VSO volunteers were largely not involved in any of the present riots. Most were able to stay quietly at home or with friends, and were able to report within the first week to Rosie Fieth, the Field Director, that they were safe and well. A number had come to Colombo to meet friends and were trapped there. Rosie had up to 15 guests staying with her most of the time. Len Putman was the only volunteer to be seriously affected when the institute where he lived and was principal was attacked by some of the mob. Once the need for help in refugee camps became apparent most volunteers in Colombo volunteered to help relief agencies. Their most useful role was in taking messages out, and making contact with relatives and friends of those in the camps. Although distressed by the events, all the volun-

teers are in good spirits, and their commitment to helping the country has been renewed.

John Palmer, Programme Management Team, London.

⊙ The violence between Sri Lanka's Sinhalese and Tamil communities led to the death of Dr S. Rajasandaram who worked for Christian Aid in Sri Lanka. He was secretary of the Ghandiyam Society which supports poor Tamil rural communities through agricultural and health care schemes based on the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Christian Aid's project officer for Asia and the Pacific, Michael Hawkes, commented: 'It is a bitter irony that Dr Rajasandaram should have been killed through inter-racial riots. He was dedicated to Gandhi's principles of non-violence and, for the past five years, he has been promoting the most remarkable self-help development work amongst desperately poor Tamil communities. It is tragic that such commitment should have cost him his life.'

On Wednesday, July 26, Rosie Fieth, Sri Lanka Field Director, based in Colombo, telephoned me to check that things were okay in Badulla and that I had not been affected by the riots. I was happy to tell her that all was quiet. It was the last peaceful day for a while after that.

The next day it was apparent the rioting mobs had reached the town and I made my way to the centre to telephone Rosie and let her know. By 10.30 a.m. three mobs were smashing up the town, destroying the buildings and setting fire to them. I was trapped for several hours, unable to return to the Institute.



Len Putman

Escaping to Colombo

← Len Putman had been in Sri Lanka for a year when the riots broke out. He was forced to flee Badulla when his home was burnt down and all his belongings were lost.

OUT OF 34 volunteers in Sri Lanka Len Putman, training instructor/principal at Bishop Lee Technical Institute, Badulla, was the only one to be seriously affected by the riots. Recently, Len returned home on compassionate leave as he lost all his belongings when his college was burnt down by a rioting mob. While on leave Len took the time to tell Orbit his story.

Newsround

Len Putman Cont:

By about 1.30 p.m. one of the mobs had reached the Institute and it was horrifying to watch them destroy the place. The staff and students at the college were mixed; most of the resident students were Estate Indian Tamils, many of the day pupils were Sinhalese although some were Sri Lankan Tamils, and the staff were both Tamils and Sinhalese and they had always got on well together. The project head at the Institute had been politically active, campaigning on behalf of the Tamils.

The Institute had two huge gates and a corrugated iron wall about eight feet high. The mob did not bother with the gates, they simply smashed down the wall leaving the Institute completely exposed and began to destroy the buildings and hurl petrol bombs.

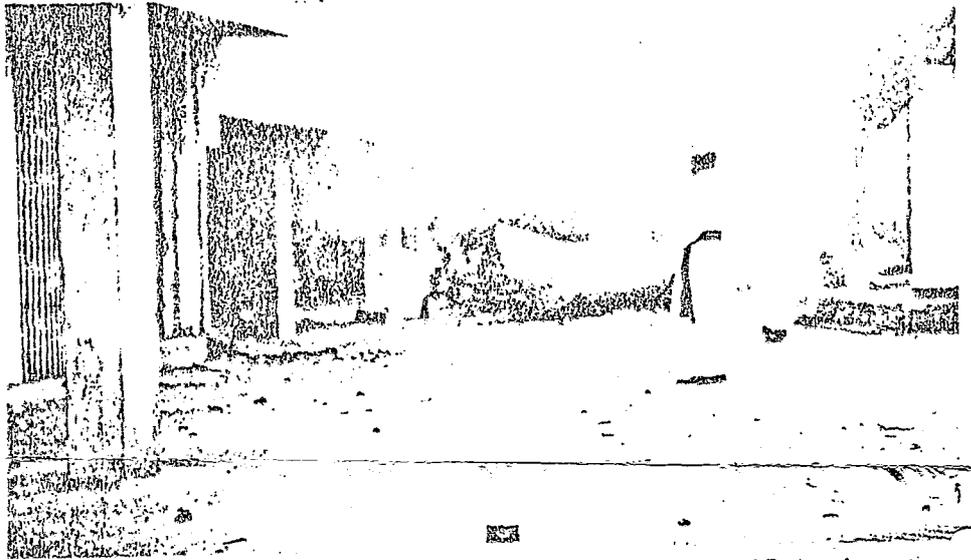
Suddenly a splinter group began to attack the residential centre, St Bedes Home, throwing bricks and stones, and owing to immediate personal danger several of us fled through the back window of the building into the paddi field beyond. With me was one of the staff, who was a handicapped man.

When things looked as if they had quietened down we returned to the centre and began to douse the flames with buckets of water. Unfortunately some of the mob saw us and returned, furious. My colleague, the disabled man, refused to cease trying to put out the fire and he was knocked down and kicked. I went over, and because I was a foreigner they stopped kicking him and told me to carry him away. We fled back to the paddi field.

Hiding in the paddi field was a Jaffna Tamil girl who was simply terrified as it was, of course, Tamils who were being attacked and murdered. We were a strange group to be stranded in the middle of a paddi field together and it seemed there was no where for any of us to go. We were wrong.

Along the edge of the field were houses, they were Sinhalese homes, yet when the people saw us stranded they came out and beckoned to us. They sheltered all three of us, gave us food and were extremely kind. I stayed with them about three hours, the disabled man and the Tamil girl remained with them most of the night until they were able to leave in relative safety.

Back on the road to the Institute I had my first feelings of confusion. Walking up the road I realised all I had were the clothes I stood up in — and they were covered with mud from the paddi field! I met two priests also making their way up the road and they offered to take me to the convent where I could shelter in the Bishop's palace until it was safe to leave.



Len Putman managed to retrieve his camera and take this one shot of Father Augustine surveying the burnt out wreckage of the Institute. To the left is a car destroyed by a petrol bomb.

Firstly, I decided to attempt to retrieve what I could from my room which was on the third floor of the centre and not yet burnt down. There were still some of the mobs around, but I decided to try the confident approach and walked briskly to my room where I grabbed a change of clothes and my camera.

One of the priests had waited for me while the other searched for people needing shelter. However, most of the staff and students in danger had been hidden by the local Sinhalese people.

We made our way back along the main road to the centre of town. Along the road the mob were going berserk, smashing Tamil houses, burning and throwing petrol bombs. It was extremely dangerous to carry on walking but we had little choice. By this time the police and the army had arrived and simply stood back and watched the destruction.

Suddenly, crazed with the destruction, one of the mob ran at me with raised sword. I was saved by Father Patrick, a Sinhalese Priest who pulled me to his side so that if the sword fell, he would receive the blow. Some of the mob rushed over to restrain the man as they did not want a priest or a foreigner killed. Once again the police just watched the incident and I was later told by a senior member of the police that they had been told that if they shot at or interfered with the mob, the army would shoot at them.

At the Bishop's palace Tamils arrived all evening for sanctuary and later as it grew dark, the nuns and staff from the college filtered in. Eventually, there were 600 crowded in the church and palace. That night was the most frightening of all.

One of the priests contacted the local police, a fair percentage of whom were Catholics, and asked for protection. There were too few of them to help and the only advice they could give was to tell the people to keep quiet. It was a night of terror — we were almost afraid to breath.

There was one fatality. The mob arrived at a sub-centre of the Institute run by nuns at Lunugala. They were searching for a priest who had already escaped to Kandy. Sister Carmella stood in the hall and shouted to them that there were only nuns there but they burst through the door shooting and a shower of bullets hit the sister down one side. She was not killed and one of the priests managed to take her to the local hospital but unfortunately as all the local doctors were Tamil they had been killed or had disappeared. Luckily we were able to get a special army pass and Sister Carmella was taken to Colombo hospital — but they could not operate without her records.

The following morning two neighbouring schools, one Tamil and one Sinhalese, were made into refugee camps and all the people were moved there. I stayed a week at the convent doing what I could until the food began to run out.

Fortunately, Father Augustine came across Sister Carmella's medical records and he got permission to drive with them to Colombo. I persuaded him to take me with him and made my way to Rosie's where I stayed until I was able to return home. Sadly, the records arrived too late as Sister Carmella had died.

Len Putman intends to return to Sri Lanka once he is re-equipped. He is sponsored by Oxfam.