

Information Bulletin No. 15

Date of Release : 4th November 1997

The Vanni: Behind the war of words

Reports

The current situation in the Vanni

[25th August 1997: Killinochchi: The murder of Rev. Arulpalan and allied developments](#)

The heart of the problem

Annexure

Vanni has featured prominently in the news since the northward bound military thrust in June where troop casualties have so far numbered above 700 dead, with the corresponding figure among the LTTE being of a similar order. With no first hand access, much of the reporting has had to do with military claims and counter-claims by the LTTE. Where the people are concerned, there has been a general acceptance that life is very difficult, medical relief is poor amidst aggravated illness, and undernourishment is the norm. Here again much of the reporting has dealt with claims and counter-claims. (e.g.: Is the population in the (uncleared) Vanni 550,000 as maintained by the government or is it 750,000 as appearing in the records of government officialdom in the area under the LTTE?)

Particular events from time to time have given added urgency to the predicament of the civilian population. About 130 India bound refugees were drowned last February when their overloaded boat struck a sand bar less than a mile off Nachchikkudah. On 28th May, 19 civilians including 4 children below 5 years drowned on their way to Jaffna when their boat on tow cracked. Concern was heightened recently over two incidents that pointed to culpability on the part of the government:

On 15th August bombs dropped by the SL air force killed 10 persons including a 4 year old child who were refugees living adjacent to the Roman Catholic church in Vavunikkulam, and injuring a further 14.

The bodies of Rev. Arulpalan of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India and two labourers who were missing since 25th August were found at Puthumurippu on 9th September, not far from the army bund at Konavil, Killinochchi. Although small groups of the army and the LTTE moved in this area, a number of circumstances pointed to the army as the killers. (See reports below.)

Although the information on the latter was initially sketchy by the very nature of communication difficulties involving 40 miles of jungle and battle lines in the first instance, it

was the kind of tragedy to draw attention to a much larger problem, although not always in a manner best calculated to ease the lot of the people. A statement by the Australian Human Rights Foundation dated 23rd September referring to the two events above quoted its CEO as saying, “It is time for the war of genocide by the racist Government of Sri Lanka to end. Also the brutal way that those who oppose this war are silenced should cease”.

Ten days later the Sri Lankan foreign minister, speaking at the UN, highlighted the LTTE’s use of children as suicide warriors, as being most inimical to the Tamil community they claim to be liberating. Vanni is a place where many things are happening and the population behind the battle lines is cut off and completely controlled by the LTTE. It becomes too easy to put together a given set of events or

parts thereof, and paint a picture that shows any one set of combatants in a favourable light and the other in the exact opposite.

The only promising way to get at the truth behind events in the Vanni is to first understand the nature and character of the political forces at work and the institutions through which they are articulated. A compilation of events is interesting, not for approaching exhaustiveness, but only in so far as they help to sharpen or to revise our initial assessment of the tendencies at work.

We now move on to some reports of events in the Vanni. The first suggests that no single event has a simple explanation.[\[Top\]](#)

Reports

16th August 1997: The shelling of Kattankulam: On this day the army from the Uyilankulam camp, 8th mile post on the Mannar-Vavuniya road, shelled Kattankulam. Two civilians, including a school boy were killed. Sixteen civilians were injured, one of whom, the local co-op manager, had a leg amputated by the MSF at Madhu. The shells were ostensibly aimed at the LTTE office situated near the village school. Behind this event, which cannot be described other than as an atrocity, lies a long story.

The Sri Lankan army gained control of the Mannar-Vavuniya Road during February this year in a move that was largely unresisted. It erected defence bunds along the road. Civilians were not permitted within about half a mile of the road except through the check point at Uyilankulam. With the commencement of the second operation in June to gain control of the north-bound Vavuniya-Jaffna road, entry into Vavuniya along this route was closed. Thus for the population in the Vanni heartland north of the Mannar-Vavuniya road, Uyilankulam became the only land exit out of the Vanni. The other means of leaving Vanni is by boat either to India or Jaffna from Nachchikudah on the north-east coast. This has proved both costly and hazardous . Another possibility used by the enterprising or desperate is to go from Vidithal Theevu to Mannar Island. The water is shallow and admits wading except for a narrow deep channel.

Once the army opened the Uyilankulam check-point in March, the LTTE lost control of the movement of civilians out of the Vanni, who included deserters from the LTTE. The LTTE’s first move to control this flow was taken on 1st May this year. Its cadre with concealed weapons went along with the civilians, fired at the army post killing two soldiers and ran

back. (See Ch. 9 of [Special Report No. 8](#).) The army was careful not to harm the civilians at the check point. But they shelled areas to the north killing one civilian and two cows.

Once bitten, the army made conditions at the check point more restrictive. This made the civilians coming there more desperate and undisciplined, through the fear that the tail enders would not be allowed in. In the meantime the LTTE too opened a check point in Kattankulam in an attempt to control and monitor the movement, and to levy taxes on items being brought in from Mannar for purposes of trade.

When the army gained control of the road, although civilian movement was formally disallowed in areas close to the bund, it tacitly allowed villagers who had their paddy fields, dwellings and economic life close to the bund to carry on as before. Parappankandal was one such village north of the 10th mile post, 2 miles east of Uyilankulam. A ruse adopted by civilians to evade LTTE checks was to go to Parappankandal the previous evening spend the night in the open outside the village, and follow the bund westwards in the morning to the Uyilankulam check point.

The only way the LTTE could counter this was to uproot all civilians living close to the main road. Instead of doing it on their own, the LTTE got the army to do it. LTTE cadre used to stand on the edge of the paddy fields and spray their automatics at storks looking for food. Such actions were predictably followed by nervous troops letting loose with cannon. The people were in no doubt what the game was about. Parappankandal and Kottakkulam north of it were in time abandoned by civilians, who besides their homes, lost also their livelihood. In a further move the LTTE shifted its pass office from Kattankulam to Periyamadhu, 10 miles away, although the exit check was at the former, considerably increasing the inconvenience.

A second attack similar to the one on 1st May on the army post at Uyilankulam was launched by the LTTE in July. The result made it extremely difficult for farmers and fisherfolk in the LTTE controlled area who depended on transporting their produce to Mannar town for sale. Uyilankulam had also in the meantime become the main exit for civilians who wanted to leave the Vanni and move to Jaffna where conditions were improving. This was done by transporting people from Uyilankulam to Mannar town, 8 miles distant, by bus, housing them in camps and shipping them to Jaffna. For this to be feasible it had to be accomplished with speed as water facilities and infrastructure to house refugees in Mannar were poor. A further sign of LTTE intentions was that on 1st July its cadre boarded and set fire to MV Mission, which was chartered for that purpose and was anchored off Pesalai. The nine crew members were later released. The deed was condemned by the UNHCR, further impairing its badly strained relations with the LTTE.

The course of events led to increasing nervousness on the part of the soldiers manning the entry point. The routine was for soldiers to move forward in the morning from Uyilankulam camp to the entry point, and signal the civilians waiting at a distance to come forward. The soldiers would then try to get some order into the oncoming stampede by shouting at them to come in single file. On occasions when their shouting and gesticulating yielded little result, they closed the barrier and hooked it back to the camp through fear that LTTE gun men were coming behind civilian cover.

On 16th August LTTE gun men did come behind civilian cover and killed 6 soldiers before escaping. This was the prelude to the shelling of Kattankulam referred to at the beginning. Once more the soldiers took care not to harm the civilians at the check point, who

unknowingly had been used as a cover by the LTTE. The routine then was further tightened. Civilians wanting to enter had to wait at a distance and come one at a time when called, through a new barbed wire corridor. The number entering was restricted to 600 per day, three days a week (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday), resulting in many, especially the older and feeble having to wait it out for days, often going to Periyamadhu by LTTE bus (Rs 50 one way), stay in lodgings run by the LTTE, and try the next time. The army has presently relaxed its regime, and more than 1000 have been observed entering before the barrier is closed at 12 noon.

The LTTE's ban and consequent attacks on north bound shipping should also to be seen in a different light. Its main impact in Jaffna is to curtail travel. More significant is its impact in the Vanni. It has effectively applied the brakes on people quitting the LTTE controlled areas. The ban on shipping came at a time when the transport of displaced persons to Jaffna by the government had got into some organised state. Those leaving now are people desperate enough to spend possibly months in transit camps or pay large sums for a risky passage by unseaworthy vessels. On the face of it, interestingly, there are no restrictions on the part of the LTTE. The exit visa simply costs Rs 200 per civilian with an additional Rs 500 for the young of recruitment age.

By October (1997) the shelling of forward villages north of the bund, now largely occupied by displaced persons, had become frequent. People normally move to safer areas during the night. On the night of 11th October the LTTE made a failed bid to disrupt army lines. The civilian areas were subject to intense shelling. Fortunately most civilians had moved out upon seeing the LTTE. [\[Top\]](#)

19th February 1997: The sinking of the India bound refugee ship: The unknown aspect:

The news of the tragedy was broken to the Colombo press by military sources who listened to LTTE radio communications. A trawler with about 160 passengers to India on board ran into a sand bar about a mile off Nachchikudah, and broke under the impact of waves on the aft. The alarm was raised from the shore. LTTE boats which rushed to the scene rescued 20 persons with the Indian crew. The rest were drowned. About 85 bodies recovered were taken to Akkarayan hospital. A report in the Sunday Times of 23rd February gave more details quoting "The Voice of the Tigers" which interviewed some of the survivors. They said that the boat was overloaded and the crew were drunk. The TULF leader in a letter to the president blamed the tragedy on the restrictive and harassing manner in which those coming into Vavuniya from the Vanni were being treated.

The Tigers put the blame on the allegedly drunken crew. But that the Tigers were under heavy pressure is revealed by the fact that the survivors were interviewed on their radio, who reportedly went as far as to talk about overloading. Now the loading was done by the Tigers who collected about Rs 10,000 from each passenger and paid part to the owners of the boat.

This is confirmed by reports from the Vanni. They regard mainly the overloading as significant. The 'Father's boat service' (named after Fr. Thevarajah, the initiator) which plied between Kalpitiya and Mannar before the land route was available, employed capacious trawlers from the Pesalai Fishermen's Co-operative. The navy restricted the passenger capacity to 75 although more than 100 were often carried. Hence to any layman who knew something about sailing, 160 passengers in a fishing trawler from these parts would have sounded outrageous.

Indeed testimony from the Vanni confirms that there were problems which were quickly suppressed. About 75% of the passengers were displaced persons from the LTTE leader's village of Valvettithurai. As the loading proceeded they complained vehemently that the boat was being overloaded. The LTTE men in charge ignored the protests and importuned them to get on board. This was known to many people on the shore in Nachchikudah. As soon as the news of the disaster became known, a number of people on the shore protested angrily, blaming greed on the part of the LTTE as being responsible for the disaster. Two protesters were taken away by the LTTE, and are said to be missing .

Another man displaced from Katkoyalam in Vadamaratchy to Puthukkudiyiruppu, lost his wife and daughter in the disaster, and was freely expressing his anger. He was summoned to a local LTTE camp. After coming out he was subdued. The incident also highlights another problem. Among those who disappeared under LTTE rule are also a significant number not having any group, political or institutional affiliation, whose crime was spontaneous village level opposition. Their number would be among the hardest to estimate.

28th May 1997: Drowned en route to Jaffna: What follows is based on testimony given to the Uthayan by the survivors. Three displaced families comprising 14 persons associated with the goldsmith's trade, left Mallavi by van at 6.00 p.m. on 27/5 reaching Naachchikkudah at 10.00 p.m. They joined others, all of whom left for Jaffna at 5.00 a.m. on 28/5 in three boats linked together by tow ropes. The party named were in the first with the engine. The goods were carried in the second, and the last had 30 passengers. An hour from departure at Pallikudah, a gust of wind set off a wave that crashed on the side of the third boat. The passengers shouted that water was coming in and the next moment the boat split. The boat driver jumped in and helped to save some. He then threw belongings from the second boat into the sea to make room for the survivors. 19 were drowned including 4 children below 5 years and three young girls. Three survivors swam off to Pallikudah saying that they had lost their kin and had nothing to go back to Jaffna to.

The LTTE stopped the movement of passengers to Jaffna about the end of July. Later reports from the Vanni said that boats would resume about 18th September. Another 12 persons undertaking this journey were reported drowned on 3rd October, the one survivor Kandiah Selvaratnam having lost his entire family.

Sunday, July: Mankulam: The army fired 35 shells into Mankulam town which was then a main population centre. 7 civilians were killed, including Rathy teacher, and about 24 were injured. The advancing army was then between Omanthai and Puliyanukulam. Mankulam is 15 miles north of Puliyanukulam. The matter was raised with the army by an official of an international agency. The army officer denied their firing the shells that had come from the south and blamed the LTTE. According to the official from the international agency, they parted after agreeing to disagree.

On a subsequent occasion, the army fired several shells into villages on the Oddusuddan - Mankulam road, forcing the population to flee west of Mankulam.

15th August: Vavunikkulam: The air force bombed the cluster of houses bordering the Church of Our Lady of Velankanni, then under the parish priest Fr.J.J.Mauilis. 10 persons were killed. The only known LTTE target is a practice camp $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away. How the air force made such a mistake, if it was one, remains to be investigated, given that the church with such a distinct facade is situated in a huge compound, and thus clearly visible from the air.

It is sad that the credibility of the air force is being questioned not on grounds of accountability to civilians, but only in view of unaccounted losses in aircraft. An item in the *Sunday Island* of the 30th October titled 'Muthiyankattu Tiger Base Bombed' gives a feeling of how decisions are taken such as in the instance above. Airforce Commander Oliver Ranasinghe was quoted: "On information extracted from a Tiger terrorist taken into custody by the airforce, it was revealed that terrorists fleeing from Mullaitivu were taking refuge in Tiger camps in the jungles of Muthiyankattu. The airforce therefore successfully targetted several camps within Muthainkattu jungles completely destroying them".[\[Top\]](#)

The current situation in the Vanni

In an interview given to the *Sunday Island* (5th October) Gerard Peytrignet, the outgoing head of the ICRC delegation stated, "... our estimate is that there are 500,000 to 700,000 persons (in the Vanni), half of them live in conditions of displacement from their homes. They rely on assistance from the government or complementary assistance from humanitarian organisations. The government has continued to send basic supplies. There is an impression that some categories of persons do not have access to food. This is not because there are insufficient food stocks. But because some of them do not have the means to acquire food... There are certain categories of internally displaced persons who are not entitled to free rations. These are partly persons who left Jaffna after Riviresa 2 [i.e. after the army began establishing control over the entire Jaffna peninsula from April 1996.]

"[As regards nutrition status] there are problems in specific areas. But this is not so alarming in terms of numbers. However the problem is growing and needs to be addressed. Some organisations, such as the *Medicins sans Frontiers* are trying to operate supplementary feeding centres. They have not been given the authorisation, as yet.

The medical situation is also of concern. There is no base hospital. Only local medical structures exist. Thousands have to be treated when the hospitals have been designed for only hundreds. Surgery is performed by international NGOs such as MSF . The ICRC and the Sri Lanka Red Cross provide medical services in the more rural areas. We operate mobile health teams."

What follows under the next three sub-headings is drawn from two recent reports prepared by Oxfam[1] for Killinochchi & Mullaitivu and by Save the Children Fund (SCF) [2] for Mannar, on the theme of Listening to Alternative Voices. A variety of topics were covered based on interviews with displaced and resident (host) communities in groups as well as individually. [1] hints at the sensitive nature of the task when it says, "A second reason for not re-interviewing identifiable individuals is socio-political". On no-one at Katchilamadhu making themselves available to be interviewed despite prior notice, [1] says, "The GS(Village Headman) of the area explained that people were "tired of too many meetings with the movement [i.e. the LTTE] and everyone else". The general message from those questioned is that the war is the main problem and expressed an overwhelming desire for peace.

Health: Medical transport is most often accomplished by bicycle, and going to a government facility often involves going one day ahead, standing in a queue the next and returning the following day. This together with the time and expense involved forces families without adequate help to forego treatment or to seek it late. Necessary medicines are often unavailable at government clinics and purchases have to be made in the black-market.

Pale Sclera and nailbeds displayed by many women is an outward sign of probable iron-deficiency and anaemia. Hospital reports of a growing percentage of newborns being underweight is another chronic sign of maternal under-nutrition. Most commonly reported illness are malaria, "brain fever" (i.e. cerebral malaria, chronic headaches or migraine), scabies and typhoid.

On the matter of severe psychosis and mental deficiencies [1] says, "...in nearly every locale one or two people would speak up saying that every displaced person has been deeply traumatised by their experiences. In one relocation site a woman told us: "You can't separate them from us, each on of us, whether they admit it or not, needs counselling"."

In the matter of relief to amputees and paraplegics [1] says, "The Government of Sri Lanka embargo has halted all supplies of prostheses, crutches, wheelchairs, leg-braces and all metal or fiberglass from which these could be locally fabricated."

Children: High incidences of malaria, diarrhoea, scabies and respiratory infection were reported among displaced children. To many of the parents, treatment of children's illnesses was a major expense. [1] stated that in general most children were found to be adequately immunised though coverage was significantly delayed for many. [2] however stated, "There is also evidence to suggest a compromised cold chain, which if true will have the effect of neutralising the hard work that has gone in to vaccination and anti-polio campaigns over the last two years. There are a number of reports of children getting measles a few months after being vaccinated in 1996, suggesting that the vaccine has indeed been damaged."

An estimated 25% of the displaced children were not enrolled in school and many of those enrolled were not attending. A number of reasons were given from frequent illness, a lack of books, distance, lack of resources or food at home, overcrowding at schools, to and the non-distribution of free government school uniforms this year. [2] however also added, "Some parents were obviously worried by the potential for recruitment in and around schools, although this was only referred to obliquely and no one reported active recruitment by the LTTE." A mother of a teenage son was quoted as saying that had the school been further away or in a more isolated location, she would have been hesitant to allow her son to go for fear of recruitment.

Earnings: The day wages of hired labouring men varied from Rs 75/- to Rs125/-. Such work when available is mainly seasonal. The corresponding figures for women are lower by 25 to 40 per cent. For the self-employed (eg. wood-cutters and bicycle mechanics) the earnings are very much lower and are many spent on curing illnesses and in maintaining the all -important family bicycle.

We may note here that both the government and the LTTE are in different ways responsible for the extortionate cost of basic necessities in the Vanni. The restrictions imposed by the government are unreasonably and punitively stringent. For example, the amputees denied artificial limbs are often civilian victims of government shelling. A civilian crossing into the Vanni is for example allowed only one sheet of panadol and four cakes of soap, which is carrying military necessity rather too far. On the other hand large scale traders who purchase their goods from the army enjoy generous concessions. When they take their goods in they first supply the LTTE's requirements, pay levies imposed by the LTTE, and sell the rest with a further profit margin. For example a bicycle tyre and tube that costs less than Rs. 500/- in Mannar town is finally sold in the Vanni for Rs 1200/-.

To add some other salient features, even those who are not technically displaced often face problems of dire want. Those who are able to cultivate their fields cannot readily sell their produce. The Paddy Marketing Board is not operational in these areas. The only purchaser is the LTTE which sets the price, and payment too is generally deferred. The resulting problem of cash flow also affects all others who sell their labour.

The problem of food is expected to become more difficult next year as owing to widespread displacement, large extents of fields have not been sown for the 'Maari' (main) season (sown in September and harvested in February). Due to the army presence some of the most fertile lands around Killinochchi have been inaccessible for more than a year.

Owing to widespread displacement, keeping track of populations in a particular district has become problematic. People, displaced say, from Killinochchi to Mullaitivu or Mannar districts would trek many miles to collect their rations from a co-op in their original district, since transferring their rations to a new district would result in long delays from paper work involving the ministry of rehabilitation in Colombo. The only ready work such as is available is from organisations or agencies controlled by the LTTE. Mallavi and Madhu are the main population centres in the interior.

Among the local population those joining the LTTE are said to be few and largely confined to minors. In such cases the parents as usual spend some days going from one LTTE camp to the other in search of their child and then give up. Exceptions have been made when parents made contact before the training commenced and established circumstances such as the family having already provided several recruits and the lack of help at home. A notable phenomenon is a significant number of cadre from Jaffna giving their notice of quittance (which will be followed by a punishment spell of a few months), while several others have deserted and are in hiding. One reason is given as disenchantment resulting from the LTTE not fulfilling the promises of well-being made to their families who were persuaded to come to the Vanni. A Jaffna cadre who visited his displaced family on leave told his mother, "I don't want to give my resignation letter just now because many others are doing it. But I will see". A smaller number of displaced persons are also said to be joining the LTTE mainly because of want. The intensification of fighting has also witnessed a large number of militant dead. Around three to half a dozen funerals in a village would not be far from the norm.

To people living in the Vanni the government's claim that the war is against the LTTE and not against the Tamil people is far from convincing. The use of shelling by the army has given little thought to civilian safety. If the army's intention is to relocate civilians, this is not communicated by radio announcements or leaflets. Civilians are rather placed in the position of waiting for shells to fall and then taking the hint. In Killinochchi itself the army has driven people out of some of the most fertile areas in the Vanni and for more than a year has shown no signs of giving them access. Going by local press reports scores of civilians have gone missing or are confirmed killed attempting to pick mangoes and coconuts (Rs.25 each) from around Killinochchi. Placed in this plight it is not unnatural for the civilians to draw a sinister parallel with Weli Oya, however unlikely it may sound from outside. Moreover journalistic access to the Vanni has been debarred. Throughout the war it has been the case that journalistic access has been withheld during just those times when the government had much to hide.

25th August 1997: Killinochchi: The murder of Rev. Arulpalan and allied developments

The account of this murder was issued as a separate statement and can be found at the end of this bulletin. In a further development, the army on 2nd October detained 22 displaced civilians who went to view their homes in the Thiruvaiaru area, Killinochchi. They were taken to Elephant pass camp where they were questioned and were released at the Jaffna magistrate's court on 6th October. Magistrate K. Ariyanayagam instructed the GA Jaffna to take care of them until they are handed over to GA Killinochchi. The persons detained came from Selvapuram, Murukandy, Santhapuram and Puththuvvedduvan (Uthayn 7th and 9th October).

Most of them are from families of Hill Country origin who had settled in the area after the communal violence of 1977 and 1983, and included an old man as well as lads of 13 and 16. Of them Ramasamy Kandiah testified that five persons including his younger brother had gone into Thiruvaiaru (which lies to the east of Killinochchi towards Iranamadu tank) to look at their homes and had fallen into the hands of soldiers. Four of them, including his brother, were stabbed to death, and the news was brought by the one who escaped with a knife cut in the wind pipe who is presently in a disturbed state. He later recovered his brother's corpse.

They said that there is intense shelling by the army whenever there are confrontations with the LTTE. Elephants now frequent their former habitations from which the human presence has sharply diminished. About five elephants too have been killed by shelling. [\[Top\]](#)

The heart of the problem

Accusations thrown across the frontlines in the propaganda war based on partial truths, do little to address the underlying problems. As government propaganda emphasises, it is factually true that the LTTE recruits and uses children in a most objectionable manner. But little effort is made to understand, and in turn little is done, about the traumatic effects on Tamil children of aerial bombing, shelling and disappearances that also help LTTE recruitment. Thus the government does in practice next to nothing to ameliorate this problem of Tamil children.

Propaganda supportive of the LTTE, by the very nature of what is at stake, has of necessity to constantly advance the charge of genocide against the government. The charge of genocide in the first instance strikes uncharitably and ungraciously against the vast strides taken by the ordinary people of the South towards placing a just political solution within reach. Moreover, the charge avoids looking at many inconvenient facts.

Yet many phases of the conflict from July 1983 conveyed the appearance and feeling of genocide. These saw the widespread use of aerial bombing, regular massacres by the state forces, as well as the forced displacement of large Tamil populations from their long inhabited areas and replacing them with improvised Sinhalese settlements to act as buffers for newly installed military complexes (see Sp Rp 5, Manal Aru to Weli Oya). In a similar vein Muslims in the North - East as well as Sinhalese in the border areas can, on the basis of their experiences, claim that the LTTE is bent on destroying them in a like manner.

But on the other hand when one speaks to a number of persons in Jaffna about their experiences, one is in for surprises. Now that they could express themselves freely in private, the primary anger of many of them is directed against the LTTE. The government too could counter in mitigation that it is the only one in the world to have fed the population under enemy control while fighting a civil war.

Among these people of Jaffna, the atrocious use of aerial bombing by the state, for example, appears to have been overlaid by layers of other experiences. Those who went through these experiences as insiders saw a great deal more that was unseen by the external eye. What they saw was a terrifying disease paralysing the society and eating it like a cancer from within, vastly more harmful than the wounds inflicted by the Sri Lankan forces. The forced exodus from Valikamam in October 1995 left bitter wounds that many would find hard to get over in a lifetime. To many in Jaffna thus, current happenings in the Vanni are part of the unfinished drama of the 1995 Exodus.

In the Vanni again there is a slow wasting death of the community, which taken over a period, is far graver than anything (eg. bombing) directly attributable to the government. The numbers drowned while attempting to get away from the Vanni by sea are perhaps twice more than those who died as the direct result of military action. But then the toll on society of stress, disease, want, isolation and mental trauma, which are bad in the Vanni, surface in so many pernicious ways that do not make news headlines. Those genuinely concerned about the people would naturally be driven to pose the simple question, why not ask the LTTE to allow the UNHCR to handle the transportation of those civilians wanting to leave the Vanni, instead of constraining especially women and children to travel at considerable risk in unseaworthy vessels? The answer to this question would throw much light on the real tragedy.

These are salient realities necessarily missed by those rushing to charge the government with genocide. It is as though there are strong political and military reasons to hold these people back in the Vanni so as to conduct useful international campaigns on their behalf. Indeed, there is little evidence that the vast sums of money collected as humanitarian aid on their behalf by LTTE front organisations bring them any benefit. The main commodities entering the Vanni through LTTE channels are more lethal weapons to postpone the day of reckoning, and to drag on the days of victimhood of the people. Seldom has a people paid so high a price for the compassion of their erstwhile brethren domiciled overseas.

If one insists on using words such as 'genocide', it would be far more appropriate to demand that both the government and the LTTE cease from their joint abuse of the people of Vanni, and come to some arrangement that would guarantee their basic rights.

Helping these people requires not the use of evocative blanket terms, but depth of understanding, and following from it, application of pressure issue by issue. A part of this no doubt is to challenge the government on matters like aerial bombing, the murder of Rev.Arulpalan among many others, and the want of depth in its much vaunted concern for Tamil children.

Annexure

A Press Release:

THE MURDER OF REV. ARULPALAN AND THE GOVERNMENT'S DENIAL

25th August 1997: Killinochchi: The murder of Rev. Arulpalan: Going westwards from the Killinochchi bus depot, first comes the army's defence bund followed by no man's land for about a stretch of one mile. Murippu which has a farm, Shalom Nagar, owned by the CSI

church is a little beyond the bund in no man's land. When the army took Killinochchi in October last year, most of those in the farm at Murippu moved to Konavil, beyond the LTTE sentry point at the end of no man's land, and joined Rev. Lawrence at the CSI church there. Incidentally Rev. Lawrence lost his wife when the air force, about New Year 1994, bombed the Chavakacheri town centre near the CSI church, acting on a rumour that the LTTE leader was to unveil a statue of Kittu (LTTE's former Jaffna commander).

Rev. Arulpalan (42) was transferred from Uduvil and took up his position as the priest in charge of the Shalom Nagar congregation at Konavil in April this year. Shalom Nagar includes a church sponsored housing scheme for displaced persons. Although the LTTE had advised civilians not to go into no man's land, people habitually went into the area to collect produce such as coconuts and palm leaves for building shelter. Poverty and unemployment also spurred people to go into the area to collect produce from abandoned property, building materials by stripping houses, wood work and other items left behind by the owners, for sale.

At Shalom Nagar itself the watcher, **Arumugam**, and a few labourers continued to reside there. **Rev. Arulpalan** himself visited the farm regularly. On the day in question (25th August) Arulpalan went there with two labourers **Milita Joseph (56)** and his son **Joseph Surendran (16)**. The purpose was to cut some Palmyrah leaves for the roof of a temporary building being put up in Konavil. While the labourers set about their work, **Arulpalan** who was down with malaria removed his cassock, folded it, put it aside and lay down under a tree in a pair of shorts. The army seldom came to the farm. But elsewhere in the neighbourhood, troops on patrol outside the bund spotted some youth plucking coconuts and gave them a chase. The youth ran through the farm and gave the slip to the soldiers. The soldiers were evidently very angry. When they spotted Joseph and his son at their work, they summoned them along with **Arulpalan**. The watcher **Arumugam** and the other labourers who are eye witnesses to this got away from the area unknown to the army. From that day **Arulpalan** and the two labourers were missing.

Arulpalan's colleague **Rev. Lawrence** contacted the ICRC on 28th August. The church contacted the Defence Ministry on the same date and were told they must have been taken for a routine check. On 9th September church members at Konavil hired some youths to go into that area and do a search. They came back bringing along the remains of the three missing persons. The bodies had been found in the kitchen of one of the houses in the Shalom Nagar scheme.

The three items given below are relevant:

When the news of the murdered priest appeared in the Island of 16th September, the following appeared at the end: "...a security forces spokesman said that many terrorists had been ambushed by troops operating in the Paranthan-Killinochchi areas in the recent past. The area remains closed to ordinary civilians....terrorists move in civilian clothes to monitor defences...."

In the interview given to the Sunday Island (5th October) the ICRC head **Gerard Peytrignet** said, "There is also a problem in Killinochchi. Many cross from the Vanni at this point. There are reports of high numbers arrested and not seen and those considered to be infiltrators are shot. There are no civilians in the area. Therefore those found are often considered to be infiltrators".

The Uthayan of 18th September reported that two displaced high school students who went to view their houses in the Nedunkerni area (taken by the army in June 1997) were detained by the army (7/9). They were handed over to the Kebitigollawa Police and were released on bail at the Anuradapura magistrate's court on 17th September.

Responding to the publicity evoked by the priest's murder, the Ministry of Defence issued a denial on 2nd October which contained the following : “ The Security Coordinating Officer Jaffna, and the DIG Jaffna who inquired into the death of **Rev. Arulpalan**...have revealed that the priest had not been taken into custody by any unit of the security forces under any circumstances. Further, the church is situated outside the boundaries of the area cleared by the armed forces which is not accessible to service personnel...accordingly, all evidence shows that the death of **Rev. Arulpalan**...could probably be a result of an act of the LTTE with the intention of bringing discredit to the armed forces...”

The foregoing however suggests that the claims in this statement are not borne out by known facts. The facts surrounding the murder presented by us are based on well authenticated information provided by local sources. The injuries on the corpse of **Rev. Arulpalan** showed that he had been shot . Three fingers had been missing from his left hand owing to a festival accident with handling of crackers in his childhood. The killers had cut off this hand and removed it. The two labourers, father and son, had been hacked to death. Only a few bones remained from the father's body, the flesh evidently having been eaten by jungle animals or stray dogs. The head of the son had been severed and placed between the legs. The two labourers who had earlier lived in the South were of Malayali origin and were fluent in Sinhalese. **Rev. Arulpalan** too knew some Sinhalese. There is no doubt that the soldiers who arrested them had been told that **Arulpalan** was the priest of the church.

Civilian sources in the area also said that about twenty persons who went into 'no man's land' are missing. Twelve of them are said to have been taken into custody by the security forces earlier. The people were confident that they were alive but are now losing hope because nothing more has been heard. One person who, according to local reports, was taken into custody and had returned is a postal peon. When he told the army the work he was doing he was sent to Jaffna and asked to work in the Jaffna post office. He later found his way back home. Before the incident involving **Arulpalan** two civilians are said to have been stabbed to death in 'no man's land'. However people continue to go into the area as much as they did before.

All these serve to indicate that a serious problem of civilian security exists in the area that stems from armed forces' activity. If the import of the Ministry of Defence's statement is that the government is dodging the issue, it is most unbecoming and reprehensible.

All available evidence strongly indicates that the murder of **Rev. Arulpalan** and the two labourers was committed by members of the security forces. The absurd denial by the Ministry of Defence only shows that they have learned nothing from their handling of such matters from the '80s which taught people to attach little credibility to statements and stated intentions of the government. The authorities owe it to the people to conduct an inquiry into the matter by persons whose credibility is above board.

[The above was released on the 11th of October]