

Information Bulletin No. 17

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Countdown in the Vanni – Looking Beyond the Tigers

1. Introduction:

The purpose behind this bulletin coming on the heels of our extensive special report on Jaffna is 3 fold:

- 1. To address a mounting humanitarian problem that is being dealt with very inadequately and in a manner that creates very much alienation.**
- 2. To throw into sharper focus some of the tendencies addressed in the report on Jaffna and the imminent dangers from not having a clear policy.**
- 3. To throw further light on the debasement of the state apparatus and to sketch the new challenges to be faced by the Tamils in a rapidly shifting political climate.**

1. Inside the Vanni: The Shifting Balance

One respect in which developments are favourable in the LTTE controlled area from a democratic point of view, is that the people are beginning to assert themselves. But the causes are rooted in enormous tragedy – in great losses in life and material welfare suffered by the people. Recently the LTTE floated proposals to place the Vanni under a proclamation of state of war similar in tone to that declared by Mahattaya soon after the outbreak of war in June 1990. Under the new proclamation it was proposed to close the schools for three months and students of about the age of 13 (i.e. year 9 or standard 8) upwards to be given military

training. This was strenuously opposed by principals and associations of parents and teachers. It was pointed out by principals and teachers that they were running the schools with great difficulty under enormous drawbacks, shrewdly pointing to the schools running smoothly in Jaffna, Vavuniya and Mannar Island. The LTTE has since modified its proposal to one hour a day of ARP (Air Raid Protection) training.

An intense campaign of recruitment has been going on with a target of 5000. Political speeches are regularly made in schools and public places followed by street drama performances. In Madhu refugee camp a spokesman recently said, “You are all happy about the heavy casualties we inflicted on the Sri Lankan forces at Mankulam. But we too suffer casualties in dead and injured. We have got plenty of money, weapons and ammunition. Unless you join and support our heroic fighting forces, we cannot continue to resist the enemy with the same intensity”. Despite these intensive efforts the response to the recruitment drive has been poor. Those who join are scattered individuals here and there, rather than groups of persons. For this reason reliable estimates are not possible. For example the LTTE claimed recently that it had recruited 1000 in Mallavi, the main refugee settlement in the Mullaitavu District. But local sources place the number at less than 200. The number of recruits in the whole of Vanni in recent months is generally estimated to be about 500 although figures such as 1500 are also floated about. None of those we have spoken to recall cases of child recruitment (say 12 and below). This is partly because recruitment itself is scattered and no longer a prominent phenomenon. In general the target age seems to be about 14 or 15 and above. This is a sign that the short-term need for immediate combat is paramount. The situation is unlike the early 90s in Jaffna when the LTTE proudly displayed recruits aged 10 and sometimes even 8. That was when the LTTE ran a virtual mini state with a command of resources supplied by the government, making it feasible to sustain a reserve army of children.

The LTTE has been campaigning for recruits in the cleared areas around Vavuniya too. Their message was that they had killed 3000 soldiers who were part of the Army’s northern advance, and wanted others to join them and share in the LTTE’s triumph. The response is reportedly negligible.

There are several other indications that the LTTE is stretched for manpower. An appeal has gone out to former members of the LTTE who have married and settled down to rejoin the fighting forces, on the pledge that it would look after their families. In earlier years those wanting to leave after seven years were normally given permission to leave if they so wished. Currently there is much foot-dragging on applications for release for those who have completed seven years. Methods of recruitment too have become increasingly questionable with the passage of time. They capitalise on momentary indecision, quick removal and isolation from families. Many of the recent recruits are persons who have been stopped on the street, brainstormed, given promises of glory and pledges to look after the family, were urged to get onto the bar of a bicycle the moment they showed some vacillation, and quickly taken away. Under these conditions one would have expected marked desertion, but for the fact that escape was difficult and prospects in the cleared (army controlled) area uncertain. Yet desertion is prominent enough for people to be aware of it despite every village having LTTE informers. Recently for example a group of more than half a dozen Women Sea Tigers walked away in Mullaitivu after handing over their cyanide capsules to colleagues. Some of them have experience of seven years and are known to have been fierce fighters. Those who had encountered them said that out of the organisation they were behaving like lambs. Most of them have been caught and punished.

The LTTE's recruitment campaign is obviously running into increasing reluctance on the part of civilians. The more senior students in school see the LTTE's cause as a death trap with no end in sight. With the older folk it is not so much whether the LTTE's cause is right or wrong, as they rather feel that they have already sacrificed much and have lost far more than their due. The many families of both Vanni and those displaced from Jaffna, who have lost one or two children in the war, now have a very modest desire to protect their remaining offspring. Many of those with children coming to the age of 12 or 13 are making plans to move out into the army controlled area, simply to protect their children from the pressure posed by recruiters.

The LTTE's street drama themes are also reflective of the public mood. There are of course the usual themes: The older members of a family try to prevail on a younger member not to join the LTTE on the plea that security and studies are more important. The next thing is that the same older members are killed in aerial bombing by the Sri Lankan Air Force. The message is clearly that studies and security are meaningless until the state forces are defeated. More ironical are street drama themes which focus on issues that some the LTTE's strongest critics have been raising. For example, one such criticism is the LTTE's ardent cultivation of rank hypocrites and opportunists among the elite. The latter are portrayed in the LTTE's current dramas as making stirring speeches to inveigle other people's children to join the LTTE while being very careful in ensuring that their own children do not join. It reveals a mood of such skepticism in the Vanni, that to get any sympathy from the audience the LTTE now finds it necessary to attack this segment among its former supporters, who are again very typical of its overseas support base.

There is also an evident tactical change in the approach of LTTE recruiters to the civilian population in the Vanni. Some of them told civilians who usually move with them that their Leader himself has given them strict instructions not to alienate the civilian population. They have been asked to bear with criticism, but to somehow get on with the job of recruitment. In practice what the recruiters do is to allow the people to criticise and change the subject by saying something like, "We would even like you to come and help us. You don't have to do anything very risky, you could just carry ammunition or carry away the injured". Thus even the little room the people now have to protest and assert themselves at least in the interest of protecting their children, has been paid for in enormous suffering. Even this could be lost overnight either through the LTTE pulling off some stunning action that catches the government off balance, or through the cumulative effects of the government's own inadequacies, routine callousness shown in aerial bombing and its corruption.[\[Top\]](#)

2. Economic Breakdown

Underpinning the developments sketched above, also lies the phenomenon of economic breakdown. During much of 1996 following the forced exodus from Jaffna, the LTTE's administrative machinery was trying at least to organise some kind of subsistence level economic life. Very little of this is in evidence now. The LTTE has virtually thrown in the towel, confining itself to taxing what it can. A significant part of the population without work depends on government rations and help from International NGOs. According to NGO sources malnutrition is on the rise.

The fate of paddy farmers illustrates some salient trends. When during 1996 Vanni filled with displaced persons from Jaffna there was a local demand for paddy. The LTTE was a major purchaser but many farmers complain of not having been paid in full to date. Then private

traders came into vogue once again. A year ago the price of paddy rose as high as Rs.900/- a moodai. The Jaffna population has since declined to a small fraction of what it was, thus sharply curtailing local demand and increasing marketing difficulties. This year the harvest has been fairly good at 30 to 40 moodais per acre. A moodai fetches nearly Rs.700- in Vavuniya. Taking the cost of inputs at Rs.10000/- an acre, this means, under normal conditions, an income of Rs.11000/- to Rs.18000/- an acre. But the LTTE first offered Rs.300/- a moodai. The farmers protested and refused to sell. The current going rate is Rs.500/- a moodai. The private traders are not willing to pay more since before getting the stuff to Vavuniya there is a tax of Rs.100- at the LTTE exit point and further costs in trans-shipment at the army entry point, since vehicles from the uncleared area are not allowed into the cleared area. The farmer's profit is therefore reduced to between Rs.5000/- and Rs.10000/- for what is a good year. This is not a long-term framework for a stable economic life.

Another feature of economic life is that while many young and productive persons have been rendered inactive, the elderly have become breadwinners. It is generally easier for old folk to cross over into the army controlled area at Uyilankulam and proceed to Mannar Town. They then re-enter the LTTE controlled area with 4 litres of kerosene oil purchased at Rs.25/- a litre which they are allowed, 2 litres of coconut oil and 4 cakes of soap. These in turn are sold to traders. The trader buys the kerosene at Rs.100/- a litre and sells at Rs.125/-. [\[Top\]](#)

3. Responding & Not Responding: Waiting for Something to Give

Another recent episode is suggestive of the pressures faced by the LTTE. When the Roman Catholic Bishop of Jaffna came to Madhu for the festival during the middle of last year he was totally ignored by the LTTE. Circles close to him expressed disappointment that the LTTE appeared not to be interested in a settlement. They felt that the LTTE could have used the Bishop's visit to communicate some suggestion for a way forward. But this year in March, we reliably understand that the LTTE sent an invitation to the Bishop in Jaffna to come to the Vanni and talk to them. A meeting was duly held in early April with the LTTE side represented by Anton Balasingam among others. Leading circles in Madhu were aware that the Bishop of Jaffna had a meeting with the LTTE in Periya Madhu, but had no knowledge of Balasingam's participation which was revealed in the media. Those at Madhu thought that the talks were about seeking the LTTE's cooperation to enable the displaced population to move back to the cleared areas in Jaffna, the south coast of Mannar District (e.g Arippu, Mullikulam and Silavathurai) and the newly cleared areas in Vavuniya District along the Army's northward advance. In this connection they thought that the talks had been successful and that many people are now moving out without hindrance from the LTTE.

A senior LTTE cadre from Mullaitivu confirmed several of these trends. The loss of Jaffna, he said, was among other things a crucial financial loss. Local running expenses were, according to him, met with funds collected in local currency and foreign collections played no role in the Vanni. Foreign currency was used for military supplies and logistics. In material terms, he said, the LTTE had what it needed, adding that where fighting cadre were concerned, the numbers coming in were inadequate. He said there were recruits from 'Batticaloa' and Trincomalee', but were [age-wise] in general 'small' ('chinnan'). [See Addendum :- 'Recruitment in the Eastern Province'.]

Their logistics, he said, were intact, and foreign travel to any part of the world was not a problem. Some of the fringe pan Dravidian groups in Tamil Nadu were sending persons to the Vanni for training by the LTTE. From these same connections, an unspecified number of Indian mercenaries are said to be serving in the LTTE's ranks. There are no indications to suggest that these numbers are at present significantly large. But they are a pointer to the explosive tendencies inherent in delaying putting a political settlement into effect.

What all this means is that the LTTE is in a situation of natural disintegration within the organisation itself and also with its base population unable to take anymore. It is once more forced to go through the motions of responding as well as not responding – as to the latter its history as we have explained many times previously, precludes any response admmissive of democracy and accountability. The classic way of responding and not responding is to field Balasingam without the Leader himself making any personal commitment. Balasingam said in early 1990 that the LTTE would lay down arms when the last Indian soldier left the country. This happened on 31st March 1990. But Balasingam kept on talking to the Premadasa government even after the war had recommenced on 11th June 1990. The LTTE will not and cannot give up other violent options. For instance the LTTE recently met the senior UN representative Olara Otunnu and gave him assurances which raised hopes of civilian concerns being respected. Yet the LTTE was prepared to risk these gains in recognition and face universal opprobrium a few days later in assassinating Mrs. Sarojini Yogeswaran (17th May), mayoress of Jaffna who increasingly voiced the aspirations of the people for a settled order free of violence and gun culture. Among its expectations was to bring back fear among the people and create panic among the security forces leading to violations, thus creating a turn of events in its favour.

These actions combined with the LTTE Leader's and Balasingam's statements about the LTTE's strength as a conventional army aspiring to be on par with the Sri Lankan Army, manifest its enormous destructive capacity. [See press reports mid April on Balasingam's talks with the Bishop of Jaffna and mid May on the LTTE Leader's speech.] Placed against the tragic social realities in the Vanni, the Eastern Province and among Tamils in general, such attitudes amount to cruel megalomania. This would in turn suggest that the LTTE's recent attempts to present an accommodative face to civilian objections would be short-lived, leading to a more coercive approach to recruitment. [\[Top\]](#)

4. Security or Harassment?

The scene in a school in the LTTE controlled area during a propaganda session illustrates the general scepticism prevalent there. After finishing their speeches the speakers from the LTTE asked those in the audience who wanted Tamil Eelam to put their hands up. A few hands slowly went up. Disappointed by the poor response the speakers called for those who did not want Eelam to put their hands up. Only one hand went up. Before the speakers could get to work on the person who put his hand up the others joined in saying that he had made a mistake. By contrast, in the government-controlled area, people increasingly feel from their day to day experience that separation is being imposed on them through a hopelessly corrupt and insensitive government machinery.

In Jaffna itself, the Government has to some extent succeeded in putting its best foot forward. But elsewhere, the collective experience of the Tamils is of being branded, harassed and turned into milch cows. The branding is evident in the often humiliating manner Tamils are singled out in public during security checks. They have to live with a constant anxiety

neurosis worrying about whether they have all the right bits of paper with them, whether they would be stranded in the middle of a long distance journey, locked up or sent back. Typically, when the identity card reveals a person to be a Tamil or if a person is identified as part of the crowd in a bus bound to a Tamil area, he or she would be kept waiting at a sentry point in Anuradhapura nervously fumbling for all the bits of paper. A Tamil going home to Mannar or Vavunya would be required to carry as the minimum the identity card, a local pass, the police registration in Colombo, the pass issued at Cheddikulam if in Mannar and evidence of vocation. In Mannar for example, one staying at Pesalai or Vankalai wanting an extension of the local pass by say two days, will have to set off early by bus, join a queue at the pass office in Mannar and sometimes be arbitrarily turned back after a long wait to come back in the afternoon or the following day. While people do not generally experience difficulties at checkpoints, this is often because they have taken their loss of dignity for granted. This often comes out when a particular soldier is challenged for ordering someone to get off the bicycle and walk when there are absolutely no written instructions telling people the routine to be followed at the particular checkpoint. The angry soldier's reply could often take the form "When you see the Army, you get down and walk".

The harassment has become so much part of life that often getting a small job done requires far more effort than the job is worth in time and money. Getting 5 bags of cement to a point just outside Mannar town requires standing in queues and paperwork involving the GS, MPCS, OICs at police checkpoints and being turned away and coming again when a particular official is not available. If only 3 bags are approved by the MPCS, citing a shortage, the same procedure will have to be gone through to get the balance. People do get flabbergasted to find that they have been given a short supply so that large quantities could be smuggled off to the LTTE controlled area past the same police checkpoints.

Such a system can breed only corruption to the total exclusion of humanity. A relatively mild example of the latter was witnessed at the Chettikulam checkpoint recently. In a Mannar bound passenger bus, a woman and a man aged 80 were found to be without identity cards. The Tamil woman, a native of Mannar, had gone to work in the Middle East through agents who had supplied her with a passport under an assumed Muslim name. Upon her return the agents had removed her passport. This is a well-known racket involving official corruption at high levels that has been going on for more than 20 years. The police at Chettikulam sent the man and the woman back by putting them into a bus to Kalpitiya, against the fervent pleas of the driver and the conductor of the Mannar bus. The 80 year old man posed a security threat to no one. In the case of the woman, the most reasonable thing was to let her proceed to Mannar where the Mannar police could check out her credentials instead of sending her to places where she was totally defenceless. Also at this same check point one could witness elderly and infirm persons groping for help from passers by to struggle up to the queue and fare the worst in the disorderly rush. Having got their bit of paper they need to struggle back to the bus again by groping at strangers who may be kind enough to assist them. Does it make any sense at all, considering that they are after all citizens of the same country merely going from one place to another? Such instances are just the thin end of the wedge.[\[Top\]](#)

5. The State and Corruption

If all these disabilities imposed on Tamil civilians demonstrably improve security one may plead some justification. But this is far from being the case. We would seriously question if LTTE operations in Colombo are in any significant way checked by this security regime. The procurement of passes has become a major industry in which Tamil civilians are milked by

security officials working in tandem with different segments of civilian operators and racketeers who are not strictly differentiated by ethnicity. The rate of inflation for the price of passes has kept pace with the fear psychosis of Tamils drummed up by security officials and the media in the South, together with the feeling of alienation among Tamils. In October 1996 when civilian passage from the Vanni to the South was through Vavunyah we reported (Information [Bulletin No. 12](#)) the cost of a pass to Colombo at about Rs.5000/- from Vavunyah while unobstructed transit to Colombo starting from Nochchimodai, the last LTTE post, cost Rs.25000/-. Costs have escalated rapidly. At present, according to information obtained through LTTE sources, the cost of a pass for unhindered transit from Madhu through Vavunyah to Colombo is in the region of Rs 100000/-.

Thus as long as the LTTE is thinking of a few operatives in Colombo rather than hundreds it is hard to see how this regime makes a difference. Where civilians are concerned this pass system has assumed the proportions of a public scandal which no one is willing to do anything about. As soon as one enters Vavunyah one learns that one could have a day pass with the harassment of renewal or the seven day pass for a couple of thousand Rupees. A particular arrangement in Vavunyah is an example of how bizarre things can get. Those seeking to reside in Vavunyah when permitted are issued 3-month passes, to be renewed on expiry for another three. When a holder wants to travel to Colombo, he or she will have to find another 3-month pass holder as surety. The surety's pass is then taken away pending the traveller's return within the guaranteed period. During this period the surety cannot leave Vavunyah whatever the exigency. Even old folk going to Colombo for medical treatment have to look for sureties. These curious matters come under a Senior Superintendent of Police with the Orwellian sounding designation of Population Control Officer. Even more curious is that by paying Rs 6000/- or so to agents one could go to Colombo with no restrictions and with no bother of finding sureties.

Now all civilians leaving the Vanni exit through Uyilankulam and are taken to Mannar town to sort out their pass problems. A pass to Colombo was priced at about Rs. 7000/-. It was then reported that several persons who had handed over the money to policemen had been cheated. A more foolproof system costing more is now said to be operated through proctors. A particular case illustrates the brazen openness. A young woman who worked as a domestic help in Singapore came home on holiday and went to the LTTE controlled Vanni to visit her family. She returned to Mannar town having given all her money to the family with the intention of returning to Singapore. She had an entry permit, which required her to be there before a certain date. But first she needed a pass to go to Colombo. A senior police official upon discovering the girl's plight kept delaying the approval of the pass clearly signalling that he wanted a bribe which the girl had no means to pay. After trying for nearly a month the girl's application seemed to have got into the wrong tray and she got her pass. The next morning she was happily standing in the queue for the Colombo bound bus. The senior police official who came there saw her and said angrily that he never approved her pass. The girl protested and showed her pass. The official made an angry scene saying that if it was his signature it had been forged and that he could lock her up. The girl was taken out of the line and deprived of her pass. She had no choice but to give Singapore a miss and go back to her family in the LTTE controlled Vanni. It is under the pressure of such experiences that people are increasingly posing the question, what is the meaning of being Sri Lankan if we are forced to live in this manner?

Another aspect of state corruption that is done very much in the open is smuggling of restricted items to the LTTE controlled area. Although talked about among the locals for a

long time, matters came to a head, according to civilians sources, because of some disagreement between the Army and local police officials. According to these sources the Army closed down some lodges in Mannar town which were said to be lodging persons without the piece of paper permitting them to lodge in Mannar. But the lodge keepers had kept the police on their payroll. Piqued by this the police are said to have detained a consignment of Pajero vehicle tyres brought into Mannar by a businessman under a permit approved the brigade commander. They wanted the consignment to be produced in court. They argued that all state institutions and NGOs who used such vehicles brought their own spares from Colombo under permit and did not obtain them from private traders. The implication was that this consignment was meant from the LTTE. It is said that it was the resulting friction between the Police and the Army that led to a top-level investigation. The brigade commander was transferred out and a leading trader was placed under custody for a time, but no further action was taken and the trader was released since evidence was lacking. Where the trader was concerned, he had a valid permit for possession of the goods he was taking outside Mannar town, and this was explained as being taken for purposes of storage in his own premises. Where the brigade commander was concerned, it was said, he had used his discretion based on the case made out in the application of each trader and even with regard to goods that could be carried to the uncleared area by civilians, he had been relatively generous.

The new brigadier who took over in January is said to be far more restrictive. Nevertheless smuggling remains an almost day to day occurrence, with sections of all security services and some Tamil militant groups involved. In an earlier report we had already referred to naval personnel canvassing fishermen to smuggle. In another occurrence police investigators were questioning civilians pointed out as LTTE helpers by a member of the LTTE who had surrendered. The detainees were told, "If you want to smuggle, you come to us. There is no problem". Thus smuggling takes place at several levels. At the highest level the arrangements are fool-proof and there is no individual risk involved. An example of the risks involved at the lowest level is exemplified by the fate that befell Kanagu.

Kanagu was from the Hill Country and as a boy settled down in Paranthan in the 70s. Owing to the disruption of life in that area, Kanagu took to smuggling. He had made his own contacts among the security forces including the police and the army at Thallady. He left his family just north of the Uyilankulam checkpoint and came to Mannar town regularly. What he did was to buy the goods in town carry them past the checkpoints during the night, wade a couple of hundred yards into the sea and hand the stuff over to an awaiting boat. He said that his earnings amounted to around Rs.50000/- a month. But during last December he was one among two shot dead by an unscheduled army patrol. Normally these activities take place during mutually agreed times. Perhaps the Army decides to take such action once in a way to satisfy higher authorities in Colombo. This was Kanagu's misfortune. There is also good testimony regarding the involvement of two Tamil groups. A hand cart with goods to be smuggled that was being pushed through the sea sand got stuck one night. The next morning members of a Tamil group were seen by the public asking around for a tractor to pull the cart out. One example of the economics of smuggling is that a bag of cement costing Rs.300/- in Mannar town fetches Rs.1500/- at Vidathal Thivu on the LTTE controlled mainland. After the LTTE collects its requirements and taxes, a bag of cement for civilian use costs about Rs.3500/-.

Reverse Smuggling

We had further confirmation coming from both sides that there is now an unofficial stand-off between the LTTE and the other Tamil militant groups. Members of the LTTE intelligence wing and LTTE helpers have been seen in Mannar town. LTTE intelligence men have also been seen making contact with interests that act as middlemen in rackets. Such stand offs are purely opportunistic, temporary and whose vagaries are dictated by the LTTE with no firm commitment on its part. Even the LTTE's occasional calculated attacks on other groups (e.g. the mine attack on PLOTE leaders in Vavuniya (12th May) and on the EPDP in Pungudutivu in January) seem to have led to mutual recrimination among the latter rather than to any cool reflection.

There are also indications that the LTTE too may be trying some reverse smuggling. During the middle of March a motor cycle packed with explosives set off from Madhu on the road to Vidathal Thivu, apparently to be smuggled to Mannar Island in the first instance. The brother of the cadre who was to deliver the motor cycle also went with him. At the fourth milepost before the Parappu Kathan the motorcycle descended a slope, ran into a patch of loose sand at the bottom and, the rider losing his balance, the motorcycle fell on its side resulting in a huge explosion. Both the rider and his brother were killed. The gherkin worn by the rider is said to have been torn into tiny shreds and passers by got a strong smell of decaying flesh for several days.[\[Top\]](#)

6. Aerial Bombing in the Vanni

Aerial bombing claims continue to hold their place as the longest running serial fiction dished out by the Ministry of Defence, and are taken in that spirit by the public. On 26th March about 8 AM Air Force Kfir bombers bombed Vatta Kacchi and claimed to have destroyed several LTTE huts in a forward base, several vehicles and as usual claimed that there had been many LTTE casualties. The area bombed was in fact a civilian area and the details of the 8 civilians killed tell a different story. They are: Velayuthan Mangayarkarasai (18), high school student; Krishnasany Vallipillai (60) (displaced from Varany, Jaffna); Thanabalu (55); Namasivayam Balasingam (58); Muttiah Vasanthkumari (25); Chellappah Thangavelu (45); Thangavelu Sivapakkiam (43); & Ramanathan Chellamma (50). In another incident closer to Mallavi the Air Force bombed a wedding party in the house of a Chettiar. About three persons were reported to have been killed.

What one finds most disturbing about these bombing attacks is that they come usually in the wake of the advance column on the Jaffna Road encountering casualties, or immediately after the Sea Tigers hit the Navy. Having launched the bombing attacks the Defence Ministry consistently makes exorbitant claims. This does not give one the confidence that the targets are chosen with any precision or under any demonstrable military necessity. One is further disturbed when such performances come in conjunction with top brass in the defence establishment facing accusations in the press pointing to corruption and misappropriation.

Sources on the ground further confirm that bombs are dropped from very high altitudes and even where an LTTE target is correctly identified, the bombs missing the target by about one hundred yards is fairly normal and hence the regular civilian casualties.[\[Top\]](#)

7. Political Opportunism vs Representing the People's Interests

Both in the South as well as the North–East, the people most affected by the war - the poorer segments - have strongly signalled their war weariness by an unwillingness to send their sons and daughters to battle. The war itself has ceased to hold out any stakes for them. But this finds no response in the course of political developments. For its part, the LTTE never acknowledged an obligation to reflect the interests of the people. Its purely destructive stance can be sustained by maintaining a core of assassins to silence the Tamils and suicide cadre for more sensational displays of violence. But such options are not open to those committed to democracy and human rights.

The salient point is usually missed when individuals and groups taking ‘politically correct’ position attack the Government for the wrong reasons. When a war is forced on the Government (see for example the chronology of events which led to the recommencement of hostilities in April 1995 compiled by INFORM), it is mostly superficial to attack particular military decisions as being politically motivated, ego-centred or unduly provocative. For example all these accusations were made about the decision to militarily take the Jaffna peninsula. But one could, on the other hand, cite the Mullaitivu debacle or the earlier Jaffna Fort fiasco and point to what otherwise may have become the fate of the Army’s isolated garrisons in Jaffna.

The salient point is that the Government is being cornered into not reflecting the people’s interests in moving away from dependence on the war, but rather to rely heavily on the war itself. We say cornered, because at a conceptual level at least the present Government took some unprecedentedly bold steps to break the status quo on the ethnic question. Among these were the political package and the media campaign to infuse fresh thinking and encourage healthier perspectives on the issue. In this respect the attitudes of the UNP opposition and large sections of the press and intelligentsia in the South have been very harmful.

The UNP has been playing a studied double game, by on the one hand being ambivalent about the Government’s moves towards accommodation, but on the other criticising it for not talking to the LTTE and for fighting a war inflamed, complicated and passed on to it by themselves.

The upshot of all this is a drift where confusion about the LTTE is compounded by the absence of a coherent policy towards the Tamil people. The Tamil people have been relegated to mere security liabilities left to the whims and fancies of a corrupt security apparatus. For their part the Tamils are being confirmed in the view that their unenviable position is not going to change. The Tamil elite in turn are given an alibi for blaming everything on the Government and avoiding facing up to the LTTE squarely. Finally everything plays into the hands of the LTTE.

As we had already stated, the LTTE which thrives on dehumanising the community and blocking any humanisation on the part of the Sri Lankan state as well as Sinhalese civil society, will continue its destructive course. This also entails the continuation of self-imposed censorship particularly by the Tamil intellectuals and media in evaluating our political reality in a responsible manner. Both these in consequence prevent the ordinary Tamils from seeing any healthy developments in the South.

The LTTE has further recently shown its utter contempt for the people by using a suicide bomber to assassinate Brigadier Larry Wijeratne, a much-valued friend of the people of Vadamaratchy. Wijeratne at the time of his death was in Pt Pedro as a guest of the people who

were spontaneously expressing their appreciation in a series of farewell functions. By this act the LTTE grossly offended the most basic and strongly felt cultural sensibility among all peoples – that of the obligations of hospitality.

The late Brigadier Larry Wijeratne is unique in many ways and by example has given hope that it is possible to restrain the security forces from unleashing terror and keep the civilian concerns in the forefront during military operations. His approach was not merely the strategical or tactical one of a clever military officer. When we consider the total blindness shown by many politicians and even intellectuals in the South regarding the critical nature of the ethnic problem, Larry Wijeratne showed clarity and humility in understanding the plight of a people who had previously known only terror from state forces as well as their self-acclaimed liberators. When large sections of the military are still shrouded in corruption, brutality and contempt for the civilians, it is a few officers of the calibre of Wijeratne who have brought hope of a better future. It is a frightening thought that by targeting a few individuals like Larry Wijeratne, the LTTE could create such a vacuum as to push things back all the way to the 1980s. If the South and the North are unable to come out of the present state of opportunism they would deserve the LTTE for some time to come. [\[Top\]](#)

8. Looking Beyond

No one in this country irrespective of ethnic affiliation can be complacent about the degradation of the state apparatus. The 1980s were a clear indication that no one would be spared the consequences. From the press exposures of corruption at the highest levels to what is happening on the ground at the lowest, gives an impression that corruption has become more significant than the war itself. The government's policy as regards war or peace, by comparison, appears to lack any direction.

While the course of events is determined by the unwritten policy of 'Do not trust the Tamils', we will inevitably move towards separation. The only alternative is to rebuild trust, and in the first instance to treat the Tamils as people who have dignity and rights and to be conscious of the failure of the state to give them confidence. Every effort made by concerned people in Colombo to organise themselves as citizens' committees and represent the interests of the community could not make any headway or curtail alienation in the day to day life of ordinary Tamils. There were of course ritual acceptances of the problems faced by ordinary Tamils and promises of possible remedies at various levels. But nothing ever materialised. The recent round up and indiscriminate detention of up to 200 Tamil labourers from Paduwankarai who went to Polonnaruwa District for seasonal harvesting is another example of the Government's ineptitude.

The growth of this culture, which helped to brand a particular community, can be traced to the impunity conferred by a series of repressive legislation beginning with the PTA of 1979. It is pertinent to ask today whether these developments have aided security in any way? On reflection, as many argued at that time, the whole thing has been a big mistake. The problem has now reached such proportions that even this Government once pledged to cleaning up this country's human rights record seems to have given up. Having fattened on the arrogance of impunity, several sections of the security apparatus treat the Government's occasional weak interventions on behalf of human rights with complete contempt. All units, which acquired notoriety, such as the CSU and the gangs of the Munases, remain at large. Several police and military officials who were featured adversely in testimony given before commissions set up by the present Government have been promoted and hold some of the senior-most positions.

There is a strong suspicion, particularly in Batticaloa and Vavuniya, that the State maintains armed Tamil groups on a long leash only so that the several uninvestigated murders that are done at the behest of shady state agencies can be blamed on these Tamil groups.

This corrupt self-serving state apparatus is going to be a long-term problem for this country and has already rendered the Tamil problem diabolically complicated. To many Tamils living outside the war zone these shortcomings on the part of the State are much more a part of their day to day experience than the war itself. From stories of extortion and harassment at the Colombo International Airport, to Tamil homes being raided by security men in the nights and women being photographed in their nighties, many of which are true, with a number of other exaggerations and fictitious episodes are regularly fed into Tamil news networks overseas to help fill LTTE coffers. Many of those who support the LTTE do not want to hear anything else. They are determined not to see for example that life in Jaffna is not as bad as it is often made out to be. They would indeed least like to hear about the true disposition of civilians in the Vanni. This kind of blindness is helped primarily by the Government continuing to perpetuate the already discredited bureaucratic approaches in tackling security concerns and failing to deal with corruption and human rights abuses more convincingly.

The Government needs to show a will to tackle this problem not by just giving token punishments to some low ranking functionaries, but rather to deal with it beginning at the highest level. There are enough indications that it is here that the problem begins - one could hardly otherwise explain for example the vicissitudes of the drama surrounding the former Air Force chief. One sees little hope as long as the suspicion remains that Tamil civilians are being bombed to cover up charges of maladministration in the defence establishment, or that the war is being prolonged with young men and women sacrificing their lives mainly to serve the interests of those who benefit from corruption.

The LTTE has manifested its destructive intentions and contempt for the people by the two recent killings in Jaffna that have resulted in fear and despair. What is most needed now is a clear policy of giving hope to the Tamil people. [\[Top\]](#)

Addendum

Recruitment in the Eastern Province

The inherent indiscipline among the armed forces evidenced in the Kiliveddy massacre of February 1996 and in the Tampalakamam killings of February this year are a pointer to the alienation experienced by the Tamil youth in some of the rural parts of the Eastern Province. At the same time there is disillusionment with the LTTE's cause which has brought death and distrust within the community without offering even distant hope. Thus the incipient LTTE sympathy that is sparked off from time to time by the callousness of the state forces is largely the result of a political vacuum. The resulting recruitment by the LTTE is currently however said to be low. [See [Bulletins 10 & 16.](#)] Around Batticaloa the recruitment by the rival forces brings out clearly the underlying political bankruptcy. In the town area which is largely under Army control, the LTTE's image is enhanced by the indiscipline of groups operating with the Army. As for recruitment, experienced local observers associate it fundamentally with extreme poverty, economic breakdown, lack of alternative openings and the long-term disruptive effects of disappearances and loss of breadwinners. In the Army controlled area most of the recruitment is, according to these observers, done by Tamil groups close to the Army. The so called Razik group has recruited from particular areas such as Mamangam.

Citizens' groups have received specific complaints of abduction by these groups. A young married villager minding his father who was warded in Batticaloa hospital, was abducted by TELO when he went to town. He was released upon the intervention of citizens' groups before being sent for training. A poor labourer who joined the Razik group absconded when allowed home on leave after training. He was taken by the group and later found dead with an injury on the head caused by a sharp object. The magistrate returned an open verdict.

Conditions of poverty are more extreme in the LTTE controlled Paduwankarai area. Even where students had struggled and secured university entrance, a number of them are daunted from continuing through difficulty in clothing and feeding themselves. The people themselves have become marked as allegedly LTTE supporters, thus adding to their problems. Traditionally a large number of them who are agricultural labourers travel to Amparai and Polonnaruwa districts to earn a substantial package by helping in the harvesting. In Polonnaruwa recently up to about 200 of these labourers were picked up willy-nilly by the security forces and sent to Anuradhapura prison as LTTE suspects, leaving their families in a quandary. Sources in Batticaloa have commended the Muslim employers for having been very helpful and understanding towards the labourers and their families. Such measures by the State have tended to make a bad situation worse.

The LTTE's recruits are again young. Among the boys several are said to be about 13 years of age, but who are strong for their age owing to having worked as labourers. Also smartly dressed LTTE cadre with their gadgetry and modern conveyances strike a fashionable posture in this area where the war has drastically limited the horizons of the people. Observers have particularly noted the effect of the sight of the women cadre on young girls of the area surrounded by drabness. Yet the numbers joining the LTTE are said to be small in comparison with the 80s and early 90s.