

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

September 1997

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 at Shalom Nagar farm 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.