

# MASSACRES IN THE EAST

**T**he continuing struggles between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka have recently spawned a new kind of 'border village'—Muslim or Tamil villages adjoining major areas inhabited by the other ethnic group. Villages of this type abound in the Eastern province and have recently been the scene of horrific massacres that have exacerbated relations between these two communities. This, in turn, has further complicated reactions to the Tamil demand for a merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces and to the peace process.

It is in order to illuminate the effects of this factor that we look at the violent events that took place in Alanchipothana, Karapola and Muthugala, three villages separated by about one and a half miles, on the 28th and 29th of April, 1992.

A report from INFORM, a human rights documentation centre, describes these villages:

Karapola, Muthugala and Alanchipothana are very small villages on the northernmost borders of the Mahaweli 'B' Scheme, off the Polonnaruwa- Batticaloa road. Beyond Alanchipothana, the Mahaweli river flows on its way to the sea at Trincomalee. On the other side of the river is LTTE territory.

Karapola (1320 Tamil, 9 Sinhalese and 1 Muslim inhabitants) and Muthugala (548 Tamil and 9 Sinhalese) are *purana* (old) Tamil villages. The villagers have lived there for over seven generations or more. They have been rice cultivators by tradition, and are typical dry zone farmers, impoverished, resigned to their fate. Somehow it seems as if the prosperity visible in the Mahaweli scheme villages- in System 'H' for example- has passed them by.

Alanchipothana is a more recent settlement of 825 Muslims from the Eastern Province who lost their homes in a major cyclone in the late seventies. The village is situated on not-so-arable land. As a result, the farmers of Alanchipothana have tended to work the fields of the villages of Karapola and Muthugala on a leasehold system. In this cycle of things, the Tamils seem to have been pushed further down the ladder of deprivation and pauperisation while the Muslims have moved upwards. This unfortunately reinforces some of the racist stereotypes that abound in Sri Lanka. In the present case, what needs to be kept in mind is that some degree of economic tension between the Tamil and

Muslim communities was already present in the villages. And when the Tamils declared, after the New Year festivities of mid-April, that they would not be leasing their fields to the farmers of Alanchipothana any more, this gave already-existing tensions a fresh impetus. The Muslims allege that the Tamil villagers could never have taken such a drastic step without the backing, financial as well as moral, of the LTTE; the Tamil villagers say that the Mahaweli authorities have told them that all lands that are not farmed by the title-holders will be reclaimed by the Mahaweli Board. Whatever the truth, the fact that concerns us at this point is that the tensions between the Tamil and Muslim villagers were exacerbated by the land issue.

The people and the security forces are equally aware of the vulnerability of these villages, but the state response has a peculiarly lop-sided nature. Alanchipothana had a police post, manned by a Reserve Sub-Inspector and 26 reserve police constables; the village had further security in the form of 15 regular homeguards and 35 volunteer homeguards, all armed. Karapola was given security by a police post with an officer-in-charge and 30 reserve police constables. However, the Tamil villagers who are in the same vulnerable position as the Muslims have no armed homeguards. This adds to the state of tension between Muslim and Tamil villages.

The Army has a post situated somewhere between the two Tamil villages.

## The Attack on Alanchipothana and the Reprisal

The following details of the attack are extracted from the INFORM report:

Shortly before midnight on the 28th April, an armed group of men and women, in uniform, launched an attack on the Police Post in Alanchipothana. They were taken completely by surprise and fled in the face of their attackers, leaving behind their radio 'receiving' set. The gang then moved on through the southern part of the village, killing, burning and looting as they went. Almost all the killings were done by hacking and cutting; few shots were fired. At the end of it, almost 60 people lay dead or dying; more than 30 of them were children below the age of 12, who could not run away fast enough. Some of the Muslim villagers said that



they saw young men from the Tamil villages of Karapola and Muthugala among the marauders; this has yet to be proved conclusively. Others said the group gathered together before they left the village and shouted out slogans including "Long Live" (*Vaalkai*) to various LTTE leaders in the area.

Villagers in Karapola and Muthugala, a mile or so away, said that they heard the noise of shouting through the night. A little before dawn, the villages of Karapola and Muthugala, in that order, were attacked by a group of armed men. Many villagers testified that the Home Guards and Civilian Defence Squads of Alanchipothana were among the attackers; since victims from Karapola and Muthugala bore bullet wounds, it is likely that this story is true.

Once again, the toll of human life was brutal; the route of the two villages left over 50 persons dead, and again, over half the victims were children.

55 houses at Karapola and 89 at Muthugala were burnt to the ground.

## The Breakdown of Security

As we have indicated, the police post at Alanchipothana proved totally ineffective. Since they fled leaving their radio equipment, they were unable to contact the police station at Welikanda till 6 a.m. the next morning; the messenger bearing the news had run over 10 miles to Welikanda through scrub jungle to deliver the message.

The police post at Karapola proved equally ineffective in giving security to the villagers. The army post situated between the two villages too proved unresponsive; the villagers of Karapola allege that when they ran towards the Army Post in the hope of finding safety there, they were fired upon and chased back into the village and into the arms of their killers.

The motivation for the attack is set out in the INFORM document as follows:

The security forces seem to feel that the attack by the LTTE on Alanchipothana was motivated by the fact that it is one of the villages that lies furthest north in the Welikanda area. It is because the Muslim villagers are there that the Police, and now the Army are able to maintain an outpost there: therefore, driving out the Muslim villagers could well be part of an LTTE thrust to 'clear' this area. The security forces want the Muslim village there, so that they can operate in the area freely; the LTTE wants the Muslim villagers out of the area for this very reason. Trapped between the military strategies of two armed groups, the villagers of Alanchipothana, Muthugala and Karapola are paying

the price of being pawns in a war-game they do not really understand.

The report describes the current situation in these areas as follows:

By the 10th of May 1992, over ten days since the incident, 508 villagers from Muthugala and Karapola were living in a makeshift camp set up in the premises of the Muthugala Tamil Maha Vidyalaya. They were the ones whose homes had been destroyed. Others continued to live in their homes in the two villages but said they felt extremely vulnerable and insecure.

The situation in Alanchipothana is also the same. Many villagers had left for the homes of friends and relatives nearby and said they do not want to return to the village until they are assured of total security.

## The Response of the State

Faced with the almost total breakdown of the security arrangements instituted for the protection of these areas, the government appointed a three-member team headed by retired Supreme Court Judge D.G. Jayalath to inquire into the incidents, the lapses on the part of the security agencies and recommend measures for improvements in the security arrangements.

The Committee has found that

- i. the police post at Alanchipothana was inadequately equipped to defend the village against well-trained and well-equipped opponents and that police reservists and homeguards should be better trained to deal with attacks.
- ii. there was a lack of communication and liaison between the police and the army.

The Committee was "convinced that some villagers of Karapola and Muthugala had taken part in the attack on Alanchipothana along with the LTTE" and also that "some of the homeguards together with the Alanchipothana villagers had been responsible for the killings at Muthugala and Karapola."

It is reported that the government is to take action against the officers at the Karapola police post and against all homeguards and villagers who have been identified as having participated in the massacres.

## The Future

The Police Post in Alanchipothana has now been reinforced by an Army detachment and the Army post between Karapola and Muthugala has also been further strengthened.



However, looking at the villages and taking into consideration their strategic location on the very fringes of the disputed 'border' between the north central and northern provinces, these measures still seem woefully inadequate. Given the nature of the conflict at the present moment, one feels that in fact no adequate steps can be taken to guarantee the safety and security of these villages and of the civilians who live in them. The resolution of the ethnic conflict at the national level seems to be of essence if these villagers are to carry on with life 'as normal'. And until such time as a resolution is formulated by those in power on both sides of the divide, these villagers, and thousands of others like them scattered in similar villages throughout the north and east will continue to pay with their lives.

The question of the provision of adequate security for the villagers who live in these so-called border villages of the north and east therefore emerges as a key issue when considering not only the recent events at Alanchipothana, Karapola and Muthugala, but also the incidence of similar massacres in other villages in the north and east in the past months. This is particularly important when one considers that there is absolutely no mechanism in place that can effectively prevent the recurrence of such incidents.

The economic relationships between the inhabitants of these villages are of a pattern that is reflected throughout the Eastern province and indicate quite clearly the need for a political solution that recognises these realities.

## DELIBERATE KILLINGS

*Amnesty International, in a statement issued in June 1992, refers to the massacres at Alanchipothana, Karapola and Muthugala. We publish below excerpts setting out Amnesty's position.*

### Deliberate Killings of Muslim and Tamil Villagers in Polonnaruwa

While welcoming the government's prompt action to investigate this incident, Amnesty International is concerned that the commission may not have been perceived as impartial. Although the government has taken care to include a member of each of the three main ethnic communities in the three-member team, two of the members are serving officers of the security forces who may not have been perceived as impartial by all the parties involved. Amnesty International is urging the government to make public the full report of the findings of the investigation team and has requested information from the government about the measures which have been or will be taken to prevent any further reprisal killings from taking place. Amnesty International has also urged that those found to be responsible for the killings be brought to trial before the civil administration of justice and that victims or their relatives are provided with adequate compensation.

Amnesty International believes that those responsible for human rights violations should be brought to trial before the civil administration of justice, following a full and impartial investigation of the case by methods which are in

accordance with United Nations (UN) Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions as endorsed by the UN General Assembly on 15 December 1989 by Resolution 44/162. Such action would also accord with recommendations made by international human rights bodies such as the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, which in its report of 3 December 1991 (Ref. E/CN.4/1992/18/para.381) stated that, "human rights violations should be pursued before the civil administration of justice with all the necessary vigour." Amnesty International fears that military authorities may not pursue the investigation and prosecution of fellow officers as vigorously or impartially as a civil court would and that the sanctions applied may bear no relation to the severity of the offences.<sup>1</sup>

Amnesty International is repeating its recommendation for a thorough review of the command and control structures of the security forces, with particular attention to the use and control of armed civilian groups. Two of 32 recommendations for the effective prevention and investigation of human rights violations which were submitted to the government in September 1991 were pertinent to this issue. Both recommendations were among the 30 accepted by the government in December 1991.

The two relevant recommendations stated:

**(Recommendation 28): In the light of the use by the security forces of several armed groups within the population, such as Muslim home guards, and**

