

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Pastoral Peace Moves

The consecration of Bishop Kenneth Fernando, as the episcopal head of Sri Lanka's Anglican Church, took place in December in a glare of publicity. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself was here to grace this solemn occasion. A few weeks later, the silver-haired scholarly Bishop was once again the centre of greater public attention - this time as a peace-maker. On January 6, the Bishop went to Jaffna, met Mr. Velupillai Prabhakaran and came back to Colombo with a peace message. At press briefings and public appearances, he has made a strong appeal for a negotiated settlement of the war.

There is nothing new in Pastoral visits to Tiger-held Jaffnaland. Last year a number of such visits took place. Impassioned peace-appeals were always the end result of such visits. But Bishop Fernando's call on Jaffna was different in at least three aspects. Disregarding the warnings of the military, he crossed by boat the high-risk 'no-go zone' of the Jaffna lagoon which separates the Peninsula from the mainland. ('A Bishop is there to take risks, even of being shot, when it comes to God's calling,' responded Rev. Fernando to a question at a recent diocesan meeting.) Then he met and held discussions with the elusive and dreaded Mr. Prabhakaran, the LTTE supremo, this being the first audience that Mr. Prabhakaran has granted to a visitor from the South in recent years. Colombo newspapers flashed colour photographs of the smiling and relaxed Prabhakaran exchanging niceties with the Bishop and accompanying clergy. Then Bishop Fernando succeeded in getting two Sinhalese POWs released from the LTTE's custody; the release of two policemen, from among 40 odd other POWs, was Prabhakaran's 'gesture of goodwill' to the South.

The clergy who met Prabhakaran are of the view that the LTTE leaders were willing to negotiate with the South, if an alternative to Eelam was offered. Did the LTTE have any alternative in mind? The Bishop says that Prabhakaran was reluctant to discuss constitutional matters. 'Let intellectuals from the south come and discuss these things' was his curt but polite response when the Bishop pressed for the rebel leader's views on the Select Committee's proposal. He had, however, promised to 'study the Select Committee proposal carefully.'

Sinhalese nationalist spokespersons were quick to pounce on the Bishop and his mediatory efforts. Some even called on the government to take legal action against the

Bishop for violating the emergency law that prohibits passage across the Jaffna lagoon. Others characterized the Bishop's move as part of an international conspiracy to promote Eelam. Some are simply infuriated that the Bishop described a 'cold-blooded murderer' as "a man of human qualities." The Sunday press, both Sinhala and English, were replete with denunciations of the Bishop and his peace moves.

Two incidents that occurred soon after the pastoral group left Jaffna, weakened the Bishop's case somewhat for further peace visits to Jaffna. Two days after Prabhakaran had released the two policemen to the Bishop's custody, LTTE fighters killed six policemen in an attack. Then came the sensational story of LTTE deputy leader Kittu's death on the high seas, aboard a ship that was reportedly carrying a huge quantity of arms. All this reinforced the view in the South that Prabhakaran was merely taking a naive Bishop for a propaganda ride. Thus, the Sinhalese militarist lobby made its own day out of the visit.

Ironically, Bishop Fernando's peace move failed to enthuse even the human rights and peace community in the South. Many of them were skeptical of the political purpose and outcome of meetings with Prabhakaran. "God knows no politics," commented a Colombo-based HR activist, after listening to the Bishop's fervent appeal to Christians to abide with God's calling.

Pastoral energies could better be spent on organizing meetings between Tamil and Sinhalese citizens' groups in war-torn Jaffna. A genuine North-South dialogue needs to be initiated. Yet, Southern civilian groups meeting with Northern military men will hardly serve any purpose for peace.

Deaths in Exodus

The shocking report of the discovery in Austria of the battered bodies of five Sri Lankan youth, dead due to suffocation or freezing, raises many troubling questions about illegal migration from Sri Lanka which has now reached proportions of a mass exodus. Agency reports say these young men may have died in the early hours of January 25. Their bodies had been dumped on the side of a freeway to Vienna, indicating that deaths had occurred while they were being smuggled inside a car boot or a container truck.

A few weeks ago, there was a report about a Sri Lankan youth whose frozen body was discovered in the Pyrenees.



According to some of his acquaintances, he was crossing the Spanish border on foot, heading towards Italy. The Pyrenees winter was too harsh for him to survive the arduous journey. In Colombo, there are stories of many Sri Lankan men and women stranded in border areas of European countries, facing the risk of death due to severe cold and starvation. Some even seem to risk the possibility of being shot by border guards and pirates.

Why this diaspora of mostly young men and women? The question becomes all the more difficult to answer when we encounter an important facet of it: a sizeable section of these youth are from the South.

Tamil migration from the war-torn North-east to all parts of the world is perhaps easy to explain. Human condition is such that no hardship or risk can deter the will to escape death. While one section of young Tamils is ready to face the bullet or to bite the cyanide capsule for the dream of an Eelam, the other crosses rivers, mountains and deserts, to find safe havens for itself and its families. Until recently, Tamils constituted the majority of both legal and illegal immigrants from Sri Lanka. When Sinhalese youth, in their thousands, also join the hazardous trek to the unknown, at a time when the South is relatively free of violence, one wonders.

We recently had occasion to encounter some of the potentially 'abroad-bound' men and women. In terms of economic standing, their backgrounds vary. Amazingly, a few of them held well-paid jobs. They abandoned all this to be in Canada, Germany or France, working as casual laborers or to live on the dole. A young couple—the wife

drew a very comfortable salary from an airline—are now farm laborers in Japan. A private sector executive, who enjoyed perquisites which University academics still dream about, left his job, went to France via a shady route and ended up as a cab driver. Another well-paid executive of a corporation went to Canada after much effort only to work as an assistant to a grocer. Unemployed and under-employed youth also constitute the bulk of the exodus.

Some anecdotes may tell us how deep seated, though complicated, is this desire to leave the country. One man got a court warrant issued against him, obtained the services of a human-smuggler to reach an European country and filed for political asylum. Another whose final destination was Germany trekked to Afghanistan to join his contact man. In March last year, two batches of Sinhalese 'refugees' landed at the Honolulu Airport on two consecutive days without any travel documents or money. Among these 'refugees' were married men, with employment. But they had documentary evidence to prove that back home they ran the risk of being arrested or 'disappearing'.

A new wave of migration of the youth has arisen in Southern Sinhalese society, too. Two generations died in 1971 and 1988-89. A third is now fleeing the country. Europeans may tell them, 'Oh, but your land is beautiful.' Yet, they take tremendous risks, undergo unanticipated hardships, or subject themselves to utter humiliation. Why?

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... Wrists in blood, teeth clenched, feet bare
on this soil that's like a silk carpet —
this hell, this paradise is ours.
Shut the gates of servitude, keep them shut,
stop man worship another man —
this invitation is ours.
To live, free and single like a tree
but in brotherhood like a forest —
this longing is ours.

From Invitation
Nazim Hikmet
1947