

The Clergy Goes to Jaffna

A new debate has sprung up in Colombo where both hope and despair about ethnic peace are intermingled: should the members of the Buddhist clergy visit Jaffna to meet the LTTE leaders? While Rev. Balapitiye Siddhartha, the leader of an eleven member peace team of Buddhist monks, is making preparations to go on the long trek to the war-torn peninsula, some others in the South have been saying 'don't go.' "If you go to Jaffna at this moment, you are only helping the Tigers," is the essence of the anti-visit-to-Jaffna argument.

Priestly visits to Jaffna are not new. In recent months, a number of Christian clergy of various denominations have visited the peninsula on pastoral as well as peace missions. Some of them have issued impassioned appeals for peace, ethnic reconciliation and an early end to the war. Illustrative of this sentiment is the peace plea made by the Catholic group that visited Jaffna in March under the leadership of the Bishop of Chilaw. The Bishop's press release said: "Time is running out. The senseless war in the North and East must stop. Peace with dignity and honour is what the people there yearn for."

What is still new in the unfolding controversy is that a team of Buddhist monks is planning to go to the land of the 'enemy'. "Message-couriers of LTTE leaders" is the term which Nalin de Silva, a leading spokesperson of the Sinhalese war lobby, recently used to describe the Jaffna-bound Buddhist monks. His evocative phrase encapsulates the extremist Sinhalese opposition to what is seen as an act of treachery.

In the nationalist mind, both Sinhala and Tamil, Sri Lanka is a land sharply divided, and that is precisely what de Silva's

phrase is all about. The entire mode of reckoning is persuasively simple, albeit naive and menacing, because it comes in an atmosphere of war mongering. Buddhist monks, so goes the argument, should not carry peace messages to the enemy, because it only hinders the war effort; Tamils in Jaffna are Tigers, and talking to Tamils is talking to murderous Tigers. The Sinhalese nationalist mind is so obsessed with the Tiger that a Northern society sans the LTTE is beyond the pale of even demographic imagination.

On an earlier occasion, in December last year, a delegation of Buddhist monks did go to Jaffna, but for a different purpose and in a different company. The *Mahanayaka Thera* (the High Priest) of the Malwatte Chapter of the *Siyam Nikaya* led this particular delegation which was helicoptered to the battle zone by the Sri Lankan army. They visited the army camp at Palalai and chanted *seth pirith* to bless the soldiers. The state-controlled *Daily News* published a photograph, in half-jest perhaps, of the Maha Thera inside an army bunker surveying the battle field through a pair of binoculars. The timing of this particular visit to Jaffna in the company of the army's ground commanders was not entirely accidental. It was the high point of the controversy about the Thondaman proposals to initiate peace talks with the LTTE.

Christian Visits

The visits made by the Christian clergy have, meanwhile, been less spectacular and more oriented towards the peace process. In recent times, they have made it a point to meet the Tiger leaders as well. Rev. Soma Perera, the former President of the Methodist Conference, was in Jaffna in early December and held talks with Anton Balasingham

and Yogarathnam Yogi, two senior leaders of the LTTE. The message he brought to Colombo was that the Tiger leaders were prepared for an alternative political model as a settlement to the war in the North.

Is the LTTE ready to accept a model short of a separate state? Rev. Soma Perera and other Christian peace groups appear to think so. Even more important is that, as observed by these peace missions, people in Jaffna are now talking about 'peace with dignity and honour which does not necessarily reject the idea of a unitary state.'

In the last week of March, the Bishop of Chilaw, Rt. Revd. Frank Marcus Fernando, led a Catholic peace mission to Jaffna. In a statement issued in Colombo on its return, this mission claimed to have met and held discussions with "a fair cross section of the people in the North such as ordinary citizens, members of the Citizens' Committee, humanitarian groups, university dons, students, religious leaders as well as high ranking officials of the LTTE."

The Bishop's delegation stated that "the core message" conveyed to them by these "various groups" was that an opportune moment for peace had come and that it should not be missed. The Jaffna people, according to the Bishop's press statement, expressed "genuine and innermost desire to live in unity and harmony with the people in the South" whom they considered as their fellow citizens.

A Buddhist Mission

The eleven member delegation of Buddhist monks is scheduled to be in Jaffna on April 18. According to Rev. Siddhartha, the head of the mission, this →

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visit will be made in response to a request made by the LTTE. The request, in fact, was made in early February by Mahathaya, a top LTTE leader. At a meeting with some Colombo-based journalists, he is reported to have said: "Tell the government to send Buddhist monks, and not the soldiers, to the North." Mahathaya's request was probably a rhetorical one, because at this time many leading Buddhist monks were in the forefront of a pro-war campaign. The Tiger leader is said to have told the journalists: "If the Buddhist monks came to the North and saw the situation for themselves, they would be in a better position to advise their political leaders."

Divaina of March 31 published an interview with Rev. Siddhartha on the proposed peace mission. The questions put to the monk by the paper are symptomatic of the Southern ultra-nationalist wish that the war effort should not be jeopardised by talking peace. Some excerpts:

Q: Reverend Sir, there are reports that you have decided to lead a delegation of Buddhist monks to Jaffna. Can you tell us what made you to take this decision?

A: Newspapers had reported a request made by the LTTE that Buddhist monks should come to the North. I decided to respond to that request.

Q: Do you think that the other demands of the LTTE, which are being put forward by means of a war, should also be met in the same way you have decided to meet this particular request of the LTTE?

A: No, not at all. I am totally against an Eelam.

Q: If that is so, what do you really expect from your visit to Jaffna?

A: Our main purpose is to explain to the LTTE the consequences of the war. The other objective is to hold talks with them regarding the release of members of the army and the police who

are being kept prisoners by the LTTE.

Let us quote a few more 'questions' from this interview. The questions are actually nationalist statements:

- i. Whatever may be your intentions, as some critics have already pointed out, your visit to Jaffna at a moment like this will amount to accepting Eelam in an indirect way. Don't you think that you, a member of the *Maha Sangha* who represent the vast majority of the people in this country, will merely affirm the Eelam demand by visiting Jaffna?
- ii. Do you really have anything to propose as a solution to an organisation which believes in the gun?
- iii. Several senior monks have already made statements against any visits to Jaffna by Buddhist monks. Do you have any particular reason to disregard these warnings?
- iv. Some political commentators are of the view that the LTTE's ultimate objective is not only to establish an Eelam, but also to destroy Buddhism. Do you, Reverend Sir, accept that?

The Sinhala-Buddhist Critique

Peace missions by the Christian clergy have run into criticism by both Sinhalese and Tamil ideological groups. Representing the Sinhala nationalist point of view, the *Divaina* political correspondent wrote on March 31:

Once again, a group of Catholic priests have gone to Jaffna to meet the LTTE leaders. The purpose of their visit is said to initiate peace talks. What did all those who have met the LTTE earlier achieve? They only forced the Sinhalese people to accept the LTTE demands. Is there any sense in meeting with an organi-

zation which is committed to nothing short of an Eelam?

Rev. Balaptiye Siddhartha's determination to visit Jaffna as a Buddhist peace missionary is obviously an act that goes against the grain of the dominant ideology of the Buddhist church. It has created a great deal of uneasiness among the *Sangha* intelligentsia. So far, only one leading Buddhist monk, Rev. Wellawatte Gnanabhiwamsa, has expressed support to the idea that Buddhist monks too should visit the land of the Tamil people. Others appear to see a diabolical conspiracy behind the planned visit of Rev. Siddhartha. For example, the *Divaina* of April 13 carried a statement attributed to Rev. Arankattiye Kavindhaja, a leading monk from the North-Central province, with the headline, 'A Conspiratorial Objective in Jaffna Visit.' "It is not a peace mission; only an underhand conspiracy" is the essence of the *Divaina* report of Rev. Kavindhaja's view.

Conspiracy or not, the nationalist *Sangha* intelligentsia is in a real fix. Earlier, they managed to stop Mr. Thondaman's planned visit to Jaffna. They could easily cry foul at Thondaman, because he happened to be a Tamil. This time, the 'traitors' are from among their own ranks. And traitors they are, because "going to Jaffna in search of peace at a time when the LTTE is losing the war amounts to an attempt to save the Tiger organization from inevitable defeat." This, incidentally, is a part of a resolution passed by an assembly of monks held at Vidyodaya Pirivena in Colombo on April 11. The full text of the resolution appeared in *Divaina* on April 13.

Tamil Reactions

The critical response of Tamil political groups is equally interesting. Both the EPRLF and PLOTE have expressed grave reservations about the usefulness of these peace missions. Their main point is that the Christian peace groups basically echo political interests of the LTTE, and not of the Tamil masses. 'The peace missions meet, essentially, →

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the LTTE leaders; they rarely go out and seek the views of those who are critical of the LTTE. They do not condemn the LTTE brutalities on their own people; ultimately the good-hearted peace missionaries allow themselves to be used by the LTTE' is the gist of the EPRLF-PLOTE critique.

So, an almost obsessive hatred of the LTTE is universally present in the war and peace debate in Sri Lanka. Even some Tamil human rights groups are disturbed about what they consider to be the endorsement by peace missions of the LTTE's political agenda in which peace now happens to be included for manipulative objectives. Take, for example, the critique presented by the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) of the Jaffna University:

The other peace makers involved in these types of approaches to bring the two parties to the negotiating table also do not understand [the fact] that if these two parties

do not have any concern for the ordinary people and are only concerned in preserving their own power, then the natural outcome will again be a continuing tragedy for the people. Their inability to grasp this fact has allowed them to concentrate only on asking the LTTE what they want and then reporting back to the other side, and releasing empty statements which repeat the LTTE pronouncements, such as the one they are prepared to talk without any preconditions (UTHR: *The Trapped People Among Peace Makers and War Mongers*, February 1992, P.6).

In an almost evangelical spirit, the UTHR has castigated all 'peace makers' for "their lack of grasp of the reality" in the North.

We all are trapped in the reality of a multi-layered war, aren't we?

Perfection of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

W.H. Auden: *Epigraph on a Tyrant*