

Two peace activists were invited to be part of a government organised group of peace activists that visited the Jaffna Peninsula on 10 May 1996. This was two days after the first journalists were taken to Jaffna since the onset of Operation Riviresa 1 in October. The following is a brief report of impressions gleaned from seven hours spent in Jaffna.

IMPRESSIONS FROM A VISIT TO JAFFNA

The rickety propeller plane landed at Palaly - Jaffna's only airstrip - at 10.30 am and began unloading its human cargo. Anxious soldiers going to the front, nervous bureaucrats assuming duties and eager politicians - some hoping to do good and others looking for a photo-op - were all unloaded unceremoniously from the aircraft. There was no reprieve from the arid and dusty Jaffna breeze, except for a quick drink of ice water. Then the army gave us its tour of the Jaffna Peninsula.

Jaffna is inaccessible, except by air with government permission, or by land with Tiger permission. The roads are empty, apart from the ubiquitous Jaffna bicycle and the occasional motor-scooter. There is no motorised transportation other than the army's. All other vehicles have been taken by the Tigers in their trek to the jungles of Kilinochchi. The army took us around in their jeeps. We visited the famous Nallur Kanthasamy Temple, Jaffna Hindu College and finally we stopped at the hospital. The tour was crammed tight, but despite the presence of the army, it was possible to move freely and talk to civilians, openly.

Civilians are back in Valikamam after almost six months. The flood of returnees that began with Riviresa 2, has slowed to a trickle. Except for those who ended up in Kilinochchi, most Jaffna Tamils, who fled Valikamam, are back. Artillery fire, airforce bombing, fear of the army and Tiger compulsion led to the exodus. The reasons for the return are simpler. People want to go home. It is no surprise they choose life in their homes over life in a squalid refugee camp. But they would not have done so if they had felt directly threatened. After all, life in a refugee camp, however squalid, is preferable to death at home. They returned because they saw a notable change in the notorious Sri Lankan Army. Known for their brutality and barbarism, returning Jaffna Tamils concurred that the army has become professional and purposeful. Except for a few incidents of individual misconduct - a rape and a double murder, both in Chavakachcheri - Tamil civilians dismissed rumours of large-scale killings and rapes.

Behind Jaffna Tamil praise for army behaviour, however, lurks a fear. Is this new-found army restraint simply the result of an easy military victory over the Tigers and will the army rapidly revert back to its old behaviour, once the Tigers begin their guerilla counter-attacks? Or does this signal a transition in the army, from an institution that saw itself as fighting Tamil civilians to one that will limit itself to fighting Tiger guerillas? This question will be

answered in the next two months. At present there are both negative and positive indications of how it will be. First the negative ones.

Masked men - members of the LTTE who have changed sides - have returned to check points. Their job is to identify suspected members of the LTTE. Ironically, the Tigers' own system of allocating scarce resources in Jaffna, when it was under their control, is helping the army in their quest. Tigers and members of their families were given special identity cards which entitled them to more provisions, shorter queues and other perquisites, vitally important in an economy of scarcity. Other Jaffna Tamil families were also issued identity cards by the Tigers, but they were ordinary ones. Holders of special identity cards have been destroying them in order to hide their connection with the Tigers. Suspecting all persons who do not have their LTTE issued identity cards, the army has begun investigating them. But this is an endless and counter-productive task.

If the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act is strictly implemented, every Tamil, north of Vavuniya, will have to be convicted. There is no Jaffna Tamil who has not seen a Tiger (a violation of the PTA if it is not reported to the authorities). The army has a choice. Either assume every Jaffna Tamil is a Tiger or assume that nobody is. Assuming the former would be disastrous. The only viable option available is the latter. Grant an amnesty to all members of the Tigers for past crimes and only investigate fresh ones.

There are positive indications as well. Just the day before our arrival, the Tigers threw grenades at a checkpoint in Nachimarkoviladi. Dozens of civilians were in line, waiting to be checked. One soldier was killed and two were injured. It was a Tiger attempt to provoke the army. Fortunately for the civilians the other soldiers were not provoked and did not retaliate. But will this last? That is the question on the mind of every Tamil who has returned to Jaffna.

The Tigers are still present. They remain in parts of Valikamam, where the army has yet to go. They also continue to remain in Vadamarachchi. But their presence has changed - from conventional soldier, clearly apart from civilians, to guerilla, mixed in with them. Anonymous letters are already being received by government employees to prevent them from becoming part of any civil administration in Jaffna. But so far there have been no killings.

The desolation and devastation is shocking. The cumulative damage of three rounds of warfare - Operation Liberation (June 1987), Operation Pawan (October 1987) and Operation Riviresa October 1996 - is visible everywhere. Buildings in ruins, houses blasted to bits, walls pockmarked by bullets, and craters everywhere. The most recent damage was caused by three different aspects of war. Probably the most devastating was the army artillery shelling. This is far more apparent along the main roads and in Jaffna Town. The second is landmines laid by the Tigers. And the third is booby traps, craftily set to delay the advancing army. These booby traps are hampering the immediate civilian settlement of Jaffna Town. The biggest danger to civilians today, however, is the ubiquitous Johnny mine - an anti-personnel mine named after a dead Tiger leader. Designed to blow a leg off below the knee, like all mines, it can not distinguish between a soldier and a civilian. An increasing number of casualties at the Jaffna hospital are victims of these mines left behind by the Tigers.

A visit to the Jaffna Teaching Hospital has become compulsory for all visitors to Jaffna - journalists, politicians, aid workers or peace activists. Located in the central part of town, control of the hospital has always been associated with control of Jaffna. Except for the last six months, when the hospital and its staff were compelled to leave by the Tigers, the hospital, a symbol of Jaffna Tamil resilience, has functioned throughout the war. With a new coat of paint and only a few beds, the hospital looks simultaneously fresh and forlorn.

The doctors, who have worked their under the most trying conditions, are gradually returning to their posts. There is a severe shortage of medicine. Forced to work with limited resources, doctors give aspirin for every illness, complains a Sinhala worker, brought by the government to rebuild the hospital. Curiously, the only ward intact - with cots and brightly painted pictures of Mickey Mouse on the wall - is the children's ward. The cots were too small to warrant taking to the Wannii.

There was a clamoring crowd around Sathosa, the government run retail distribution outlet. Food continues to be a major problem. Nobody complained of starvation, but everybody complained of standing several hours in line to get basic necessities. The government is distributing Rs. 50 worth of dry rations per person per day. But the queue to get it is endless. Prices on the black market, when goods are available, are several times that of prices in Colombo. A kilo of rice is Rs 60 (Rs. 20 in Colombo) and a bottle of kerosene is Rs. 150 (Rs. 10 in Colombo).

There are several reasons for the shortage of food. The government was unprepared for the sudden arrival of hundreds of thousands of civilians. They were not ready to deal with this new influx and did not have the necessary stocks with them. There is a shortage of transport and personnel within Jaffna to distribute provisions. The biggest obstacle, however, is the absence of an accessible supply route from Colombo.

Provisions for civilians come by sea and are off-loaded at Kankesanthurai harbour. This harbour can only unload a single ship at a time. Even this takes three days. Cabinet Minister, Nimal Siripala de Silva, in charge of the reconstruction of Jaffna, estimates that the government needs eight tons per month to feed the estimated 270,000 civilians in army controlled areas. At this rate the acute food shortage will never be resolved. The only short-term option is to transport food by air in cargo planes. But the Sri Lankan government does not have the aircraft for such a airlift. International assistance, in the form of large cargo aircraft, not food, is required to rectify food shortages. The ICRC, which escorted food ships to protect them from Tiger attacks, can play the same role with government organised food planes. This supply route to bring the food, along with the activation of Jaffna's effective co-operative system to distribute it, can help alleviate the immediate food shortages in the Jaffna Peninsula.

Like the LTTE before, the Army is now omnipresent in Jaffna. Distributing food, providing medical assistance, transporting civilians, clearing mines, manning checkpoints, distributing identity cards and fighting the Tigers, are all part of the army function in Jaffna. Everybody repeats the mantra of civil administration, but everybody differs in what they mean by it.

For the ordinary soldier on the ground it means less time dealing with civilians and more time to rest. For the generals it means civilian assistance to wean the people away from the LTTE. For other Tamil political parties it means their return to Jaffna. For the ordinary Jaffna Tamil it means being able to live with peace and dignity - more food and medicine, fewer checkpoints and soldiers, and no war.

Jaffna Tamils are anxious and apprehensive. They are anxious about the presence of the army and apprehensive that the Tigers may return. Dragged from one form of military rule to another for more than a decade - first the Sri Lankan Army, then several Tamil Armies, after that the Indian Army and finally the Tiger Army - they are looking for a peaceful way out.