

This note, prepared on the immediate aftermath of the communal violence in the Ratnapura area last September, highlights an unwelcome trend which needs to be addressed by policy makers concerned with the future development of the plantations. Regrettably this is not happening as evident from some of the more recent developments in the plantations.

COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN THE PLANTATIONS

A lupola Division of Wewelwatha Estate, belongs to Hapugastenne Plantations Ltd, situated about 22 miles off Ratnapura. On Tuesday 8th September, 1998 some estate youth had hacked to death two members of the majority community. Those murdered were W. Bandusena and P. Kumara. The prime suspect in the murder was one Muhundan, an employee of this estate. On the following night an armed mob from the area went on a rampage of looting and arson. During the next few days, the riot spread to several neighbouring estates. The workers fled their homes in panic. Their belongings were looted and the houses torched and in most cases reduced to ashes.

According to official statements, a preliminary survey had revealed that about 415 families had lost their dwellings and about 4,000 people became refugees. Over 15 workers with cut injuries were admitted to Ratnapura hospital for treatment and one of them had subsequently succumbed to the injuries. It was reported that some of the most affected families left the estates and have sought refuge with their relatives and friends in other safe areas. About 1500 school children who had lost their school uniforms and books are not attending schools.

It was only three days after the outbreak of violence that the army was called in and curfew declared to bring the situation under control. A temporary police station was also set up at Wewelwatha to maintain security. However, a tense situation prevailed in these estates for over two weeks. The workers had lost all their belongings including cash, jewellery and other valuables, clothing, furniture, cooking utensils etc. and more important their identity cards, birth certificates as well as the recently issued share certificates. Panic stricken they sought refuge in temples and schools while many ran away and hid in the nearby jungles for several days. Prompt action was not taken to supply these refugees with necessary food or dry rations. Work came to a standstill in nearly 20 divisions.

The affected estates and the number of dwellings destroyed in each of the estates are:

Galaboda	5 dwellings
Wewelwatha	202
Balakotuna division	21
Alupola Mugalana	65
Alupola Wellavila	60
Panagoda	50

The management, in order to get the workers back to work, got some tents through the good offices of the Social Services Department and some NGOs to provide shelter to those whose houses had been

completely destroyed. Some of the houses where the walls still remained intact were temporarily covered with roofing sheets. In the meanwhile, some temporary relief was provided by trade unions, NGOs and community members to the affected workers.

At a meeting convened at the Ministry of Estate Infrastructure on 17th September, with Minister Thondaman presiding, the affected workers were promised that those whose houses were completely destroyed would be provided with new houses, while a grant of Rs 7,000 would be provided to those line rooms that could be repaired. In addition Rs 2,000 to each family to purchase cooking utensils etc. was promised. The Social Services Department undertook to provide food relief normally available for victims under similar circumstances.

At another meeting of government officials and plantation management convened on the orders of the President on 19th September 1998, Minister of Plantation Industries Ratnasiri Wickramanayake presided. He promised that a full inquiry would be held into these incidents and assured that all necessary steps will be taken to prevent any repetition of similar incidents in the future. At this meeting, Mr. Seneviratne, Peoples Alliance M.P. for Ratnapura, stated that while Bandusena, one of the two persons murdered at Wewelwatha estate was the estate leader of their union, this riot had been triggered off due to a private quarrel. He drew attention to the widespread damages caused and the great deal of fear and insecurity that prevailed among the workers and therefore wanted the temporary police station that had been set up at Wewelwatha to be continued until normalcy returned to this area.

Minister Wickramanayake confirmed the decision taken at the Ministry of Estate Infrastructure two days earlier that new houses at a cost of Rs 85,000 will be constructed to house those affected. Each of these houses will have two rooms, a kitchen, a verandah and a toilet. He approved utilising the services of contractors registered with local bodies for building these houses. He also instructed the officials concerned to start work on this project within two weeks.

There was virtually a complete black-out of news in the mainstream English and Sinhala media regarding this incident. One is not sure whether it was a self imposed censorship on the part of the press or they were acting on the instructions of those in the government. The estate management and the police also prevented the press and other visitors entering the affected estates. Only the Tamil medium newspapers devoted adequate space to report details of what took place. Perhaps those who maintain that 1983 was an aberration, the lessons of that unfortunate incident had been learnt and that there

will be no repetition of such incidents in the future, were taken aback at the large-scale violence unleashed against an innocent community of workers. More importantly, this incident occurred at a time when there was a widespread claim by government spokespersons that there is no ethnic problem in this country, that the Tamils are living peacefully without any fear in other parts of the island and it is only the LTTE who are opposed to a peaceful settlement of the ongoing conflict. The Ratnapura incident was a rude shock to them and an embarrassing reminder that it was not all that safe for Tamils living in the South amidst majority Sinhala population and that there could be a major flare up of communal violence any time.

From a perusal of the reports in the Tamil medium newspapers, one can get a broad picture of the circumstances that contributed to this riot. Several estates in the Ratnapura district are isolated entities surrounded by villages. These estates provide a lucrative market for those from the villages engaged in distilling illicit liquor. Those in this trade are usually strong arm men who enjoy the patronage of political leaders, the police and in many cases the estate superintendents themselves. By paying some form of protection money, they are shielded from arrest. It is alleged that there are many brawls and even murders when estate workers default on payments due to the Kassippu dealers.

Immediate Cause

It is alleged that the two murdered men were noted thugs engaged in the illicit liquor trade. In addition one of them, Bandusena, was also the estate leader of the union associated with an M.P. for the Ratnapura district and enjoyed the patronage of leading politicians of the Peoples Alliance. True to form, these Kassippu dealers had a long and unpleasant record of harassing the estate workers especially women. It is understood that Muhundan, the suspect in this murder, was one of the handful of the new generation of estate workers who are no longer prepared to put up with the humiliation and harassment of the strong arm men in the Kassippu trade. Of late there had also been some disputes between Bandusena and Muhundan and on the day prior to the murder there was a fight between the two. Some of the estate workers allege that on the day of the incident Bandusena had come to the line room in search of Muhundan with the intention of murdering him, but Mugandan had forestalled it and murdered Bandusena and his companion.

According to one of the labourers of the estate, although the murder took place in the night, they came to know about it only in the morning. Villagers returning from the funeral house, as they were passing the workers line rooms, became abusive and warned that they would come back in the night and set fire to their houses. It is alleged that amongst this crowd there was a leading Peoples Alliance politician of Ratnapura. As the situation became tense by noon, the labourers complained to the Assistant Superintendent of the estate who advised them all to go to the factory where they were provided shelter and security fearing reprisals from the mob. There were about 900 workers and the members of their families assembled in the factory at that time.

About 7 P.M a mob of several hundred arrived in buses, lorries and vans armed with an assortment of weapons including swords, iron bars, guns and petrol bombs and started demolishing the houses and setting fire to them after looting the valuables. As most of the houses had been vacated at that time, injury and loss of lives was minimal. The timely action of the Assistant Superintendent in providing security to the workers in the factory in spite of threats from the mobs, prevented what could have been a major carnage which would have ignited the entire plantation area. It is alleged that all this happened in the presence of the police.

During the next two days the mayhem spread to the adjoining estates and by Friday altogether 20 estate divisions had been affected. It was only at that stage that the army was called in, curfew declared and the situation brought under control.

One of the affected workers, reflecting on what had happened observed:

The villagers cannot tolerate the improvement in our living standards. They are jealous about it especially seeing our children getting educated. They resent our going about these days better dressed. It was this jealousy that was behind their savage behaviour and mayhem. If we are submissive we are treated as less than human. On the other hand, if we show any resistance to their harassment, we are called tigers. They would like us to be their slaves for all time. It is to drive home this point that they unleash violence periodically once in three or five years. We have no confidence in the police. They drink together with the same people who did all this to us. They could not have acted without the protection of the police and the connivance of the politicians and perhaps with even the knowledge of the authorities in the estate itself.

Our leaders go about in comfort and security in their Pajeros. They were never sighted when the trouble was at its worst. After several days when everything was over, they hold meetings and promise all manner of relief measures. From our past experience none of this will materialise. We see no future for us in these estates which are surrounded by villages. When we travelled in buses even before these incidents took place, we were harassed and our womenfolk abused. This is worse now.

A leader of one of the major trade unions who visited the scene of the incidents had come to the same conclusion that there is no future for these Tamil workers in the mid and low country plantations surrounded by villages. He had advised them to move to safer areas when opportunities arose.

Deep- Rooted

This was not a sudden eruption of violence arising from a private feud as confirmed by the Peoples Alliance M.P. Mr. Seneviratne. This is indeed a symptom of certain trends which if not addressed early is likely to accenuate and ultimately destabilise the entire plantation sector with disastrous conse-

quences not only to the tea and rubber industry but also to the Tamil plantation workers and Sinhala villagers surrounding the estates. We can only touch very briefly on some of the issues involved. A more comprehensive study will be needed to unravel the underlying causes.

It is alleged that the illicit liquor business with its nexus between the underworld, and the police, the politicians and the senior estate staff is only one aspect of this major problem in the plantation area.

It is reported that there is a great deal of illegal encroachment of estate land by villagers especially in the mid and low country areas. There is also a growing demand that some portion of the estate land should be taken over and given to landless villagers. This has been pursued vigorously by many M.P.s. There is now a proposal to take over about 4,000 hectares of valuable productive land from the plantations for distribution to the villagers. While there has been of late a spate of complaints from the privatised estates of valuable plantation land being thus alienated, this move is strongly defended by many on ideological grounds.

Unlike in the past, more workers from the villages are now being employed in the estates. It is alleged that with prospects of better housing and improved working and living conditions, the villagers would like more employment in the estates situated closer to their homes in the mid and low country areas. This is viewed by many of them as their right denied by the presence of the Tamil workers.

Unauthorised gemming on estate land, especially in the Ratnapura area, is also a lucrative business for many villagers. Sharing its spoils is another frequent area of dispute between the estate labourers and the villagers who carry on this illegal activity jointly in many locations.

It is evident that the harassment and humiliation of the estate workers by a section of the villagers in recent years, referred to earlier, generated deep resentment and anger especially among the estate youth who are no longer prepared to take things lying down. Even the slightest sign of retaliation by estate workers to any provocation by the villagers further irritates those who want to see them remain cowed down in a state of virtual slavery. In the absence of any organised effort to curb these unwelcome developments, tension between the two communities appears to have been mounting and its spill-over in this particular estate was one of the major contributory factors to the recent developments.

There is also a major ideological underpinning to these areas of conflict of interests and tension. This is the stand taken by the Sinhala Commission and those who support their policy that the lands belonging to the Kandyan Sinhalese were expropriated in an arbitrary manner by the colonial powers for establishing the plantation industries whose benefits accrued mainly to the British. In the process of establishing the plantations the British also imported Indian labour who should be treated as migrants without any claims for the limited land resources which legitimately belongs to the Kandyan Sinhalese. They are emphatic that the ownership of land should not be given to the Indian Tamil plantation workers. This view continues to be widely held among a large section of the Sinhala elite, a typical example of which is the letter in the press (see box) when there was a major strike in the plantations early this year for a wage increase.

These developments are singularly unwelcome as they would help to transform the plantations into the next area of conflict eruption with even more disastrous consequences than the conflict in the North.

P.M

If the leader of a herd of buffaloes breaks through, the rest will stampede in. If, however, the leader is hit hard and turns around, the rest will follow suit. To whom this analogy applies is obvious.

If those who were unwanted by the country they yes, even to-day ; owe allegiance to, work against the interests of the country that gave them citizenship, then this citizenship with all its advantages should be forthwith withdrawn.

The granting of ownership of 10 perches of land per family is an outrageous mistake. Say, I am an estate worker with three children. From the date of employment I should be aware that when I retire I will have to make arrangements to live somewhere. In other words I have forty years of notice. Admirably and rightly my three children have made use of the opportunities , however meagre some may consider them, to educate themselves to obtain qualifications that would afford them better opportunities of higher employment.

No longer will they be labourers in a plantation. The owner of the estate, therefore, has to find another labourer and also part with another 10 perches when I retire. This can go on ad infinitum. How much of the estate will be left? Is this not a surreptitious way of dismantling a productive land for the benefit of a citizenry that owes its allegiance elsewhere?

It is good to remember that this land originally belonged to the indigenous population. They were ousted by the foreign rulers and are now languishing in the less friendly areas. The stark difference between the dire difficulties of the locals and the comforts of those in the labour lines were seen by me at first hand in the mid fifties. With the change in political fortunes at that time there were glimmers of hope for the locals. Let us hope they have changed to brighter rays of sunshine.

In the present climate the two major political parties should realise that the people demand in national issues they forget politics, forget communalism and get together to do the correct thing by all

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