

Information Bulletin No.3

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The Peace Process & the Incident near St. Sebastian's, Mannar.

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The killing of soldiers

The afternoon began normally at St. Sebastian's junction on 11th October. About 2.00 p.m schools were about to close, and an old lady, as was her wont, had taken her place at the junction to sell Jumbo (Naval) fruit to the children on their way home. Two soldiers who regularly passed that way on bicycles, stopped as a matter of habit, to buy Naval fruit from the lady and chat to her - a fatal habit as it turned out. On this day two LTTE cadre sneaked up to the soldiers, shot them unawares and vanished through the convent and then through the hospital premises, jumping over fences, and through the open space with bushes that lie between the Thalvupadu and Talaimannar roads. These two roads had check points. But the space in between was uncovered.

As the schools closed, people became aware of the incident. While the bodies lay on the road, the children rushed home and civilians vacated the area. Others coming into the area and many expecting the army at any time, went into nearby houses. The bodies were discovered later by policemen who passed that way, and the army, camped near the market area 3/4 mile away, were informed. [\[Top\]](#)

The army arrives

The army arrived at 2.30 p.m, by which time the area was largely deserted. Surprisingly, given the sensitive nature of the situation, no officer of rank was seen among the party. The

senior-most officer was probably a junior(second) lieutenant - no insignia of rank was seen on his uniform. Witnesses said that some of the men were stone drunk. On seeing the bodies, the men went berserk and opened fire at random.

One group went towards the hospital, entered houses, pulled men out and beat them with gun butts and kicked them with boots. About five men were wounded with serious head injuries. Another group went to Panamkattikodu, a fishing village that had suffered most during all the troubles. Again houses were entered into and people were assaulted. A fisherman woke up to find a gun barrel pointed at him. He grabbed the gun barrel and pushed the soldier away. More soldiers came in and the man was beaten and kicked as he protected his head with his hands.

Soldiers went about the area shouting filth in Sinhalese, breaking windows and demanding that the inmates come out. Those who came out were assaulted, abused and kicked. In the house of a bank official, Michael, several women were cowering inside, and were afraid to come out when the soldiers called. The soldiers fired into the house nearly missing the women. The women screamed that they had been afraid to come out. The soldiers went away. Probably for similar reasons a grenade was fired from a launcher into the house of the vice - principal of the Convent Girls' School. Police commandos at the BMC sentry point also went berserk, going into houses and assaulting people. [\[Top\]](#)

The Killing of Cyril Ranjith (Cyril Master)

Cyril Ranjith was a Sinhalese married in Mannar and long time resident there. As soldiers moved down Convent Road they first entered the house of a bank employee. Only his ten year old son and another boy who had taken shelter there were at home. The soldiers were about to shoot the two when the junior officer came along, grabbed the gun, turned it away and 'requested' the men to move on. In another house they found a nine year old boy with the mother. The boy was kicked and assaulted and still carries a boot mark on his abdomen.

A few yards down one group of soldiers entered the house of Cyril Master. An elderly shop keeper and an old lady had taken shelter in his house. He hid them behind and stayed in the hall after assuring them that they would be safe. The soldiers asked for his name and went away. Another group that was behind came in, shot him in the face and went away. The bullet went through the neck and shoulder, leaving Cyril Master dead in a pool of blood. [\[Top\]](#)

A ritual without purpose

There was no strategy or plan behind the actions of the soldiers. The junior officer was not giving any orders, and no one was directing them. All the officer did was to go behind the men and cajole them to move on, but not with any particular end in view.

The Brigadier arrived from Thallady with a group of officers about 20 minutes later. He walked down the road behind a group of men and apparently turned back upon being told of Cyril Master's murder. He asked the officers to recall the men, and was overheard telling another officer, "The Tigers are somewhere else and see where these fellows are looking!"

People recalled that the Indian Army (IPKF) had a drill to surround an area within a few minutes - day or night - if an incident took place. By comparison the Sri Lankan army had no plan or strategy to tackle even a routine military contingency. [\[Top\]](#)

The public relations exercise

The civilians were called out to St. Sebastians and kept for two hours for an identity check. Since the Brigadier could not speak Tamil, the people were addressed by Jamaldeen, HQI, Police. He told them that the Tigers had done something extremely despicable as shooting men at a holy place. The people, he said were innocent, though some concealed information about Tiger activities in the area. He then apologised for 'inconveniences'(sic) the people underwent as a result of the incident.

That evening soldiers and policemen closely, but politely, questioned the old man who had sheltered at Cyril Master's until the old man said that he did not know who killed his friend. The coroner's report merely stated that the death had been due to a bullet injury. The matter was effectively hushed up, with all the incompetence and dastardliness. [\[Top\]](#)

After effects

The event was about the worst shock the townsfolk received in the wake of promised peace and normality. Relations between the forces and the people had been generally good. It had become normal for many people to teach their children to speak of Police Mama (Uncle) and Army Mama. After this experience children were once shivering at the sight of uniformed personnel. Abuse shouted in the Sinhalese language would have also left unpleasant impressions. The situation outwardly returned to normal quickly. This is partly attributed to the feeling of discomfort among soldiers that they had managed to shoot dead the only Sinhalese living in Mannar.

Peace and the Politics of Disempowerments of the people

This may be one among several incidents of this kind happening in the government controlled areas of the North - East. But what it portends should not be lost sight of. The significance of the place and timing of the incident was not lost on the people. It was a time when the area would have been teeming with school children. Had the army arrived immediately instead of half an hour late, something far worse could easily have happened. Given the record of the Tigers, one need not entertain too many doubts about the intended purpose.

The only body in the area that could protest and call for effective remedial action is the Roman Catholic Church. It moreover has a duty and right to do so, and not less because of the venue. But merely condemning the behaviour of the Army is not going to achieve much. But there is then a heavy price to be paid for also being critical of the LTTE. In the end between the two forces having scant respect for the people, the people are silenced and marginalised. Given the nature of the situation, it is the LTTE that routinely capitalises on their alienation.

After 17 years the army is literally at square one with nothing of the professionalism needed to tackle a delicate political problem. The new junior defence minister has been addressing soldiers. But he too has shown no inclination to talk to them politically and explain their role. He has mainly concentrated on re-assuring them that the government would preserve the unitary character of Sri Lanka. Nothing very helpful in that.

The government and the media are currently focussing very much on the so called peace talks taking place at high level. As usual little attention is being paid to what is happening at the

level of ordinary people, and the efforts being made by the LTTE to transform the hopes that people had placed on the new government. Peace talks have in our situation been such a very volatile affair, that it is irresponsible not to address what needs to be done to retain the confidence of the people in the event of their failure. What recent events point to is that there is no institutional machinery in place, no machinery for accountability to the people, to prevent a repetition of the disasters of June 1990 if and when the talks come unstuck. [\[Top\]](#)

Issues & Recommendations

Issues:

1. The attack by the LTTE going by past experience, and the location, and timing were intended to cause maximum damage to the civilian population, provide potent fodder for propaganda mills and thereby give the LTTE additional legitimacy. Such attacks have become more cynical in the use of civilians and the results not less predictable. Such attacks will go on whether there are peace talks or no. After more than a dozen of years, is it the government's aim to continue to respond to such attacks through the agency of its armed forces exactly as the LTTE wishes?

2. The new government did at first recognize the need to understand the alienation of the Tamil minority and to address this as a matter of urgency.

But the distortion of priorities that has accompanied the peace talks with the LTTE may lead to a very dangerous situation. The issues raised during the discussions which were publicized by the LTTE and the government, each for its own reasons, are all to do with Jaffna. Most of these are purely material in nature- transportation, flow of goods, rebuilding the Public Library and so on. None of these can be said to be qualitatively similar as with issues like loss of life, disappearances, mental trauma and human rights in general.

It is also significant that realization of basic human rights which has become a major issue in the South has not featured in any significant way in relation to the North-East. Again the East and Rural North have been almost forgotten in the excitement of negotiations. That is how the LTTE would want it. But for the government, it is a dangerous trap.

When the euphoria is over and peace makers feel chastened, the armed forces are once more likely to vent their anger on the ordinary people. The Army Commander has said that should the peace process fail they would hit the LTTE hard. As in the past, those hit the hardest would no doubt be the civilians. [\[Top\]](#)

Recommendations:

1. Immediate measures should be set in motion to make the armed forces accountable. The HRTF has investigated and named military officers in connection with the Eastern University disappearances of 175 persons in September 1990. Judicial proceedings should be immediately instituted to make those guilty accountable. A start must be made in providing judicial redress for the victims in all similar incidents in the past.

2. The incident in Mannar could be treated as a test case. A proper inquiry should be made with a view to punishing those guilty and for instituting procedures by means of which

civilian interests can be safeguarded. It should be recognized that the normal judicial machinery available in the South is defective when it comes to the North-East. For instance a magistrate in the North-East has in practice very little authority. He dare not ask for members of the armed forces to be produced in court.

3. The government should try to understand the alienation of the people of the North-East. The reasons are often deep-seated. The LTTE is not interested in addressing this, but only in using it. The historical role of the state in violence and colonization are all part of it. The government could for instance set up a committee that would go beyond formal channels of inquiry in trying to understand the fears of the people who live in those areas.