

Speaking truth to power: the human rights situation in Sri Lanka

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Pax Christi is committed to working towards peace with justice knowing that peace is not simply the absence of war, but that it is much more. We are aware that real peace is life lived in the fullness which God intended. For the Tamil people this peace seems very far away, as never before. They are experiencing an unjust climax of horrors inflicted on them in the current war, after decades of successive injustices. But still the yearning for peace with justice is there.

It goes without saying it is a complex situation. This report is too short to cover the colonial histories of the Portuguese, Dutch and British and their repercussions; the complex evolution of the dynamics between all the communities on the island, in particular between the majority Sinhala and minority Tamil communities; the geopolitical factors in the Asian Sub-continent and the rest of the world, which have influenced and continue to influence the historical and political process. All these elements need careful and close analysis to understand and discuss fully the situation.

Pax Christi has had a long-standing sympathy for the plight of the people. Sympathy literally means, "together - suffering" or "suffering with". It is painful to really listen to the sufferings of victims of war but maybe this is the best way we can share a tiny fraction of the grief and horror which is the daily experience of those living in the war zone, and in at least our hearts we will be alongside them, as wounded healers. Unless we feel deeply the pain of those who suffer we cannot become part of the healing solution. Working for peace is not easy. Maybe the greater the intensity and complexity of the conflict, the more difficult it is. When we consider the horrors of distant wars, we can find ourselves overwhelmed, devastated, outraged. When will it ever end? When will there be peace? Where is God in this bitter raging conflict?

Since October 1995 the magnitude of the suffering of the people is so overwhelming, and so unreported that it is near impossible to convey a meaningful picture. The main reason for this is the media ban which has been imposed by Sri Lankan government on journalists reporting from the war zone. This has meant there is an outrageous lack of international public awareness of the true situation. Many people find it difficult to believe that the reality can be so different from the picture created by the military and official government version of events distributed throughout the world, presenting an oversimplified and sanitised picture of the war. Recently the Sri Lankan government secured a \$25m contract with an American PR company and has employed experienced journalists in major capitals in the world to present the world with the image they wish to project. This is actually misinformation.

When Tamil people themselves speak out about what is happening they often meet disbelief, incredulity or ridicule. Many are afraid to speak out for fear of reprisals against their families. The truth becomes buried and inaccessible. People in the West are used to being able to frame what they hear and relate it to something they already know from the media, however inadequate or minimal that may be. When the Truth is so different from what we believe, due to the effectiveness of years of news blockade, we have to suspend our disbelief for a while in order to listen.

Imagine aerial bombings of hospitals, churches, temples, market places and schools. Imagine 800,000 displaced people living homeless under trees, having to move on again as the bombing offensives continue. Imagine food and medicine being used as a weapon of war, causing severe malnutrition and illness. Imagine the gang-raping and killing of innocent school girls and women by government security forces. Imagine over 700 disappearances in a city controlled by an army which is purported to be liberating the people? All this and more the Tamil people are experiencing. Many people have never experienced living in a war zone. Therefore the above, though happening in the North and East of Sri Lanka are difficult to imagine next to the picture of beaches and palm trees in the travel agents brochures.

Each year the Sri Lankan government receives money from World Bank from the West and Japan. Last year in November they received \$560m, which was \$60m more than they asked for! This sum is roughly equivalent to Sri Lanka's Defence Budget, so it does not need Einstein to see that if the aid were stopped, the war would have to stop, but not one government will condemn the Sri Lankan government's violations. That is something to campaign for. 53 NGOs accredited with the UN, including Pax Christi International and the International Commission of Jurists, issued a statement strongly condemning the government's human rights violations in April this year. So there is an awareness among those who have a feel for the ground reality, so hopefully this is a springboard for those committed to Justice and Peace.

To give you an indication of the depth of the suffering on a more individual level I will share with you what happened to two clergymen who throughout their ministries identified strongly with the suffering of the people. This illustrates the extent to which the government forces go to violate the individual and collective rights of the people.

Rev. Jeyarajasingham was in charge of a big Methodist farm in Murunkan in the Mannar district in the North of Sri Lanka. He was actively engaged in social and pastoral work with the victims of the many disappearances and killings which were taking place in that area. The people looked up to him, because they had sense of him giving himself up for the people. He helped them and whenever someone or a group of people, for instance young girls were taken into custody he asked why. He was very inconvenient to the army because of this. They knew that he was like a hero since wherever he went people responded to him with warmth and respect. On December 13th 1984 he was requested by the army to give evidence on some of the matters he was reporting. The army shot him dead at point blank range. They also shot dead his Muslim driver and a Sinhalese policeman who was with him. Then they burnt the bodies and the vehicle.

Working for Justice and Peace was also Fr Mary Bastian who at 37 years and with ten years in the ministry was the highly respected pastor of the Catholic village of Vankali. Like his Creator he was all things to all persons there, so when in the aftermath of the 1983 pogrom, displaced Tamils flocked to him, he strained every nerve and sinew to help them. He persuaded his rich parishioners to give them food and shelter and soon established an infrastructure that made them self-sufficient. This however earned him the wrath of the security forces and Sinhala government establishment in Mannar. Soon he was the recognised leader of his people so when the security forces arrested the youth or the elderly without a prima facie case he was the first to question such errors.

When a presidential committee of all faiths was appointed to investigate the burning of Mannar town everyone shied away through fear. Fr Bastian saw this as his Christian duty and took the committee around showing them all that the security forces had done to destroy the

city. He was now a marked man. When the bodies of Rev Jeyarajasingham, his driver and the policeman were all found in the burnt-out vehicle about four miles from Fr Bastian's church all the people were afraid to retrieve the bodies. Fr Bastian, with the quiet courage to which his people had become long accustomed, retrieved the bodies and gave them burial.

The Pharisees in the army began to plot the assassination of Father Mary Bastian. On the 6th January 1985 soldiers went to the rectory at St. Anne's church at Vankali at 1 am and called out for Fr. Bastian. As he came out of his bedroom in his cassock and holding his rosary, they shot him dead at point blank range. They also shot dead ten others who ran to the rectory to try and protect their priest. They burnt his body and despite national and international protest the findings of an inquiry remain unpublished. This incident evokes fearful memories of the holocaust of the Jewish people, of Fr. Popieulescu and the assassinations in El Salvador of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the El Salvadorean Jesuit priests and the nuns by the security forces.

Fr. Bastian strove hard to walk in his Master's footsteps. His death was not any different from his Master.

When these horrific murders happen to priests and clergy, the whole community is devastated. The persecution is clearly of the people collectively. In many incidents the murders of priests follow the extra-judicial killings of numbers of other citizens. Sri Lanka is no exception. The murders of Rev Jeyarajasingham and Father Bastian were part of a systematic pattern which started earlier than their deaths and continued right up to the present day. The first part of this short report listed the ways that people are being killed. The horror and terror inflicted on the people is also a form of psychological violence. The strict ban on media keeps all these stories and thousands of others hidden. The media have to have their own people there, they will not, unfortunately believe what the Tamil community say. We in the international community have an obligation to not only listen but to hear the suffering and to take some form of action to make the world sit up and ask the right questions. At least we will not be shot for asking questions.

When words of peace are used to legitimate a war there must arise some serious questions. How can a war be for peace? Is this a contradiction in terms or not? Can it be so in some cases? Or can it never be so? These are important questions. Especially in the case of the Sri Lankan government whose President has described the war as a "War for Peace". President Kumaratunga was elected by the people, who voted for peace. She promised there would be no more war. The majority Sinhala community, many grieving because of the loss of life of their own sons in the war, wanted it to end, but were soon roused to support war again when the cessation of hostilities ended.

When there is a deep-rooted and intense conflict, there has to be a very firm facilitator, highly respected and trusted by both sides to ensure a just solution to a problem. This is basic fact. We all know it. If the balance of power is weighted heavily on one side, it is not a process of dialogue, but rather a dominance of one by another. But before thinking of raising the question of dialogue there is required a recognition of the real ground reality, a stopping of the bombing, a letting in of the media, a lifting of the embargo on food and medicine, and a withdrawal of the army which is occupying Jaffna. These things the international community has a moral responsibility to call for, with the deepest commitment and energy they can summons up to fight injustice. In the name of humanity. In the name of Christ.

I would like to end with two verses from Brian Wren's Hymn:

“Say no to Peace”

Say no to peace,
If what they mean by peace
Is the quiet misery of hunger,
The frozen stillness of fear,
The silence of broken spirits,
The unborn hopes of oppressed.

Say no to peace
If what they mean by peace
Is a rampart of gleaming missiles,
The arming of distant wars
Money at ease in its castle,
And grateful poor at the gate.