

if the Muslims of the south east of Sri Lanka using the strength of their number get away with a separate administrative unit the other Muslims in the east will be left at the tender mercy of the LTTE. I shudder to imagine the consequence of this scenario. I beg the proponents of the administrative unit to rethink of their demand in the general interest of the Muslims and I appeal to them not be driven by factional advantages.

On the proposal of constitutional and legal safeguards in a merged northeast province it should be reiterated that these safeguards would not even worth the paper on which they would be written if the majority community decides to override them. If the constitutional guarantees are a safeguard then why are the Tamils fighting for a homeland and autonomy? Why cannot they live with such safeguards under a unitary constitution? There is another parallel from recent history to prove this point. In the case of former Pakistan it had all the safeguards in the constitution to protect the interests of the Bengalis living in its eastern wing. What happened? The western wing Urdu speakers dictatorially imposed their wishes on the Bengalis and decided to walk over all constitutional constraints. The result was Bangladesh. At least for the Bengalis the territorial hiatus between the east and west facilitated the creation of Bangladesh. In Sri Lanka the Muslims do not have that

luxury in case of a prolonged conflict with the Tamils. Therefore, one should not be deluded by the promise of constitutional safeguards in a federation where the independence of the judiciary itself would come under pressure from the majority.

The most sensible proposal is to leave the north and east as they are. Let the federal solution consist of two councils one for the north and another for the east. There will be Muslims in the northern sector as there had been before. Let the experts provide all the safeguards necessary to protect the interests of those Muslims and let us witness how the LTTE would respect those provisions. If the LTTE administration in the north proves to be accommodative, peaceful, and democratic then there may be a change of heart amongst Muslims of the east at a later stage to merge with north. For the moment the wounds inflicted by the LTTE are raw and there is deep mistrust. Even the Tamils of the Eastern Province would agree with me in silence. The LTTE is already working to erode the strength of the Muslim community in the east through economic asphyxiation and physical expulsion. The failure to stop this trend by the current peace negotiators in their eagerness to appease the LTTE will only Palestinianize the Eastern Province and the logical outcome of that will be an *intifadah* in Sri Lanka. The Government + LTTE — Muslims *ʿIntifadah* is a cruel equation. ■

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IMPRESSIONS OF JAFFNA

Rebecca Walker

In June 2002 I had the opportunity to visit Jaffna, as part of a cultural exchange program organised by the SSA. This experience opened my eyes to a world previously unknown to me: a world of destruction, poverty and pain, but most of all desperation for peace. The following is a summary of my lasting impressions of Jaffna, which amount to the importance of a kind of peace that listens to the muted voices of those who continue to suffer.

First Impressions

On my return to Colombo from Jaffna, many people asked me whether I had enjoyed my trip. I was never sure how to reply. If I reflected solely upon the warm and generous welcome I received, the wonderful smell of steaming piles of freshly cooked dosai emanating from the stone hearth and the unrelenting kindness provided by my host Tamil family then yes I did enjoy myself. If I dwelled upon the luridly beautiful temples decorated in copious lashings of red and gold and the trips I made around the city perched

on the handlebars of a friend's bicycle, then again yes, I did enjoy myself. But unfortunately these are not the only thoughts and pictures that construct my memories of Jaffna. Despite the pleasure of these individual moments, they are over-ridden by other, more prominent and often disruptive memories. The following are some of the images which stick in my mind and which I believe most accurately convey my impressions of Jaffna.

When I picture Jaffna I am confronted with vivid and haunting images of row upon row of bleak and devastated houses. The remaining shells of some still hint at the splendid homes they once were, although most have become indistinguishable from the next by their bullet hole graffiti and the leaves and foliage that have twisted up around them, burying all evidence of former life. These buildings have long been abandoned, emptied of everything, yet their silence still speaks volumes of the terror and suffering that drove their inhabitants away in a hasty retreat. They stand in rubble amidst the vast areas of deserted, barren scrubland, brown and

miserable, marked by the skull and crossbones danger sign of landmines.

Envisage the beautiful and innocent faces of small, malnourished children, squatting in a haphazard queue behind Vermbadi Road as they wait in turn to collect water from the public tap. Each time I cycled past them I received chorus cries of 'White girl, hello or hello hello, I love you' followed by dissolution into fits of giggles. Although the memory of this sight brings a smile to my face, it also reveals the reality of the everyday struggle faced by adults and children alike. No homes, no jobs, no food and no hope — the existence that this bloody conflict has enforced upon so many.

Another image that sticks in my mind is a camp for the displaced. Here a large number of families were cramped into small huts patched together from plastic sheeting and palm leaves. Hardly any had an income and relied upon dry rations provided by international relief agencies. Whilst some women moved around busily collecting water and washing their children, others sat silently with the men, balanced on their haunches and staring blankly ahead. They appeared hardened to their fate, consumed by an undemanding stoicism; they had nothing and asked for nothing. I particularly remember a small girl stood in the entrance to her hut. Her father and mother were both in hospital, leaving her in charge of her two small brothers who were playing cricket in the centre of the camp. Although I couldn't speak her language, her huge sad eyes and thin malnourished body said it all the everyday struggle for survival, the suffering and fear, but worst of all the lack of change despite this time of so-called peace. War has been her life and continues to be so. Talk of peace seems to have changed nothing.

I compare this to my meeting with an officer, head of the army in Jaffna. Cushioned in his black leather chair, in what used to be the

best hotel in Jaffna he informs me of the wonders of the mighty Sri Lankan army. The army he says has built Jaffna up to what it is now a city with running water and food in the shops. For the Brigadier the war is cut and dried, started by the LTTE and finished by his army. "The LTTE destroyed Jaffna" he tells me: we [the army] rebuilt it". I cannot help but wonder how an attitude can help to build a peaceful solution. All that he says and represents suggest that his interests do not lie with the community of Jaffna. The Jaffna he knows is made up only of his boundaries and borders, enemy grounds and army camps. It is apparent that he is unaware that for many in and around Jaffna, food and running water is no compensation for the lives that have been destroyed, and even these two simple things are not available for all to enjoy. That young girl in the refugee camp certainly cannot.

All around Sri Lanka there is talk of peace. Peace is a word that seems to slip easily off the tongue and consequently the meaning (or meanings) of peace has been compromised. I am hesitant to use this word, to join the ranks of those who throw it around as the quick-fix answer to stick Sri Lanka back together. Peace may be the buzzword in Sri Lanka at this present time but it is a word often used without qualification and without consideration of its many meanings. In Jaffna, just a mention of the Tamil word for peace, *Samardhanam*, conjured up grins that lit the whole face. But once you scratch beneath the surface of such immediate and innocent delight, you lay bare the fear of what is to come. Push aside the initial hope and belief and you find that there is also a sense that the chance for change is slipping away. The bazaars may be buzzing with activity and filled with the local produce of palmyrah baskets, jaggery, mangoes and prawns, but there is still fear that the reality of a peaceful solution will drift off, plunging the country once again into a raucous of violence, deprivation and despair. ■

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