

IN THE LAND WHERE THE LTTE RULES

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As we jolted into Jaffna town from Point Pedro in the converted lorry we had hired on February 4th, the heart warming sight of a cricket match in progress on the esplanade gave a momentary illusion of normalcy. Although February 4th is not observed as Independence Day on the peninsula, it was a school holiday. The reality of the situation in Jaffna, of course, is far from normal. The evidence of aerial bombardment and shelling all around us, potholed roads that were in far worse condition than roads elsewhere in the island, hundreds of bicycles on place of vehicular traffic, the conspicuous memorials to the LTTE dead on roadsides and street corners and, after dusk, the darkness and the silent, deserted roads.

The LTTE's presence is not noticeably visible in public in Jaffna - certainly not in the way that the Sri Lankan Army is seen everywhere in Vavuniya and the Eastern Province - but no visitor can be unaware that it is the LTTE that governs the peninsula. To enter Jaffna, we had to have the clearance from the LTTE, show our identity cards and receive permits issued in Tamil by them - permits which we had to hand back when we left Jaffna. A visit to the LTTE District Courts - the only courts that prevail there today - brought this home forcibly to us. We were hospitably received by in an outer room by a group of lawyers and they served us biscuits and tea. Their spokesman was a middle-aged man who told us that they had taken an oath of loyalty to the LTTE and were happy to be practising their profession again after a lapse of some years.

Jaffna has its own Law College operating in Tamil, on a syllabus similar to that of the law college in Colombo, we were told, and a young woman attorney was introduced to us as having been in the first batch to pass out from there. Tamil is the medium, of course. International law and judgements may be cited, provided a complete Tamil translation is given. The maximum fee that may be charged for a case is Rs. 500/-. It was claimed that there were no law delays over there and that while "the Judicial system in the South is for a capitalist set-up, it is not so in the North". Civil cases are tried 3 days of the week and criminal cases on the other two days. There is no jury system. The Thesavalami law has been altered to make it possible for women to sell or dispose of their property without the consent of the husband. "The new law gives women equality and independence", said the spokesman. He informed us that judges were appointed by "the leader of our

nation" and that the death sentence may be passed only by the leader. Judges are not people with a legal background, as in the South. The young judge who came limping into the room might have been a war hero for all we know. Neither he nor the woman attorney had any English, so we couldn't speak with them. Fighters, police officers and judges may not be tried in the courts - they will be dealt with by the leader only. We noticed that not once was Prabhakaran mentioned by name, but only referred to as 'the leader'. There are 3 such courts - one in Jaffna town, the other two in Chavakachcheri and Point Pedro.

Human Rights cases don't come within the sphere of the courts. A gentleman was ushered in to sit at the head of the table round which we were and we were informed that he was the Minister of Justice for the whole of Eelam. An armed bodyguard in uniform accompanied him. "Guns are not allowed within the precincts of the courthouse, but this is an exception because of the Minister's presence", we were told. Later, we were shown the courtroom, it was similar to ours here, except that over the Judge's seat there was the Tiger emblem and above that a large portrait of Prabhakaran.

Jaffna has its own police too. They wear a blue uniform - light blue shirt and dark blue socks and a sort of turban on the head. They aren't very much in evidence on the streets. The only time I saw one was at a big road junction where he was directing the traffic which, apart from our vehicle, consisted entirely of bicycles. The "I.G.P." is a police officer who had formerly served in the South.

As for the people of Jaffna, they are in a tragic situation, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, as it were. The LTTE are in control, but Jaffna is ringed round by the army - at Palaly, Karainagar, Mandaitivu, Madahal, Panditierppu, Elephant Pass, etc., and there is regular shelling from some of these points. Obviously, no particular targets can be identified in shelling Jaffna - these are random shots calculated to remind the people of the army's presence and it is the civilians who are at the receiving end. A government servant told us in a voice charged with emotion how a colleague of his was killed along with his wife and two children when a shell from the Palaly camp hit their house. The same man told us his old school in Point Pedro was bombed five times. We drove along the sea front at Point Pedro and saw all the bombed buildings, among them Hartley College and the Methodist Girl's School. In Jaffna town, after Pooneryn, the bombing had left the Jaffna Kachcheri in ruins and the 132 year old Catholic Church of St. James which received two direct hits, killing about 40 people

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and injuring many more. Over and over again, different people lamented that it was they, the ordinary people, who were the victims of the bombing and the shelling, not the Tigers. One man said: "These children in Jaffna have never met a Sinhalese person - they only know that Sinhalese soldiers in Palaly release shells that come over and kill people".

There is a terrible fear of the security forces in Jaffna, far greater than any fear people may have of the LTTE. Jaffna is crowded with refugees from the islands and from the areas where the army has established bases. The army is not seen as a 'liberator' but as an oppressor who would be quite happy to kill them all. And the Sri Lankan Government too is viewed in this light. "The message we get from the bombing and shelling is that the Sinhala government is our worse enemy," was how one man expressed it. President Wijetunge's reiterated statement that there is no ethnic problem, only a terrorist one, has been received with dismay and some anger in Jaffna. "To solve a problem, you must first recognize the problem. How can we expect the Government to solve the problem when the President declares there is no ethnic problem?" said some university students. The same view point cropped up again and again in our conversation with different people in different places. One man said that "such statements only pushed people towards the LTTE; the LTTE use it to good effect in their propaganda".

The economic blockade also distances the Jaffna people from the Colombo Government. In a province where the electricity supply has been cut off for over 3 years as a necessary strategy of war, the people have to do without torch batteries and candles and even matches are sometimes in short supply. All cooking is done on open fire. No telephones. 3 months to reach them and there were constant complaints that letters were crudely torn open for censorship purposes and crudely gummed together again in a way that made it difficult for recipients to open them without tearing the contents. Also that money orders and other remittances sent from abroad were not always received along with the letters; mail from overseas may take

as long as 6 months to reach their destination. There is a shortage of milk foods and medicines. Triposha is not allowed into Jaffna. No anti-rabies vaccine is available, nor anti-tetanus vaccine either. The lab technician at the Point Pedro Base Hospital told us that he hadn't received any chemicals from Colombo for the last 3 years, although he keeps on indenting for them. The D.M.O. said: "Were it not for the assistance we receive from Medicines Sans Frontieres, this hospital would be a cattle shed by now."

The other grievance of the people is the lack of a safe passage in an out of Jaffna. They risk their lives and take the Kilali because they need to go in and out of Jaffna. The army officer at Vavuniya said that at least a thousand people cross each way every day. One man spoke indignantly: "We are not going on a jolly trip to Colombo - we must have a safe way to go."

The desire for peace and normalcy is naturally strong in a people who suffer the rigours of war. Life is grim for old and young alike. There is a high rate of suicide - 583 suicides and attempted suicides last year, most of them between the age of 18 and 25. The future of young people is bleak, job opportunities scarce, university administration limited. Those who can, go abroad or come to Colombo. For others, joining "The movement" seems the only prospect. The LTTE hold every successful recruitment campaigns in the schools, often showing videos they have made of military operations. Boys and Girls feel they are giving themselves to a cause. A priest from Madhu told us that when 49 bodies of the LTTE fighters were brought to Madhu

There is a system of legal aid and an Appeal Court consisting of three Judges one of whom is a woman. There is no jury system.

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after battle at Pooneryn, 112 girls and boys joined up immediately. School children who join up just leave a note for their parents and vanish.

One person summed it up like this: "We live in fear from day to day. We don't know at what time the bullets will come, or the shells, or the bombs. Many children have died in the aerial bombardments. Their mental health has been affected; many have been orphaned. We cannot have a normal life. We pray to whatever gods we believe in, to help us".