

Kenneth Mulder, an American church worker attached to the National Christian Council, was deported from Sri Lanka in late July on the orders of the government. Arrested in Vavuniya on his way to Jaffna, Mulder was accused by the police of attempting to smuggle secret messages to the LTTE. His arrest was preceded by a search of the NCC office, wherein the police claim to have discovered anti-government literature and posters generated by Mulder. All efforts made by the hierarchy of the Christian Church in Colombo to prevent Mulder from being deported failed. The charges made by the police against Mulder and the NCC thus remain, but untested in a court of law.

We publish below an essay written by Mulder—who was described as a 'peace fanatic' by the Church and an LTTE agent by the police—before his deportation.

LIBERATION AND OTHER MISPERCEPTIONS

Kenneth Mulder

Currently, the Government is carrying out its largest offensive yet against the LTTE. Starting on July 9th, Government forces moved out of their camps at the north end of Jaffna Peninsula and began pushing their way into LTTE-held territory. They were accompanied by heavy shelling and aerial bombing. The objectives of this campaign are as yet unrevealed, but it is quite possible that the Government wishes to gain complete control of the peninsula. Four days before the assault began, I returned from a 16 day visit to the North where I spoke extensively with a broad spectrum of people including clergy, civic groups, students, university faculty, and farmers. I was quite simply amazed at the degree to which their perceptions differed from those in the South. Everybody seems to think they know what the Tamils in the North want, but very few have actually asked them, they are used as pawns in the propaganda war between the Government and the LTTE.

As a result, the Southern perception of the Northern Tamils I feel is drastically wrong. More importantly, it is precisely this perception of the people and the situation in the North that is being used as an ideological foundation for the current offensive. The current battle is being called a "war for peace" and is portrayed as a war of liberation designed to free the Tamil people from the clutches of the LTTE. Once this is accomplished, it is felt that a just political solution can be implemented that will satisfy the aspirations of the Tamil people. However, such thinking is based on a government-shaped Southern perspective that I feel strays far from reality. Based on what people shared with me in the North, I believe that the current offensive will not only fail in its attempt to bring peace, but it will have lasting repercussions that will push peace even further away. In the discussion that follows, it is helpful to keep in mind that from a position of justice, the perception of the civilian Tamils in the North carries a large degree of authority. They are half of the population whose needs for justice and dignity any solution must meet. Additionally, they are most assuredly the group that has suffered the most from the ethnic conflict, having been brutalized by three different militant groups. Any solution that does not take their voice into consideration is a mockery of justice.

I shall address four main misperceptions I believe exist in the South regarding the situation in the North, the ongoing offensive being the focal point. Under each, I shall also describe other relevant aspects of the people in the North that those living in the South are unaware of.

I. The Current Offensive is Being Waged to Liberate the People of the North

The Government has clearly stated that the current offensive in the Jaffna Peninsula has the objective of liberating the Tamil people from the LTTE. Leaflets were supposedly dropped ahead of time informing the Jaffna civilians that this was the case. PA politicians have stated they are certain that people are flocking to the liberated areas, welcoming the army troops. To farther support this, the Government is taking steps to meet the needs of the Tamils in the liberated areas, including supplying food, fuel, and postal services.

However, underlying any notion of liberation must be a sense among the people that they are being oppressed by the ones they are being liberated from. In other words, the foundation for this battle of liberation is the belief that the people of the North feel they are being oppressed by the LTTE and that coming under control of the army and the Sri Lankan Government will relieve them of that oppression. But based on my conversations with people in the North, this is not how they perceive things.

First, how do they perceive the current de facto government of the north, the LTTE? On this opinions ranged a great deal. It is true that open dissent against LTTE rule is not allowed, but many told me that the LTTE no longer cracks down on those expressing private opinions. And many did share with me negative opinions of the LTTE as a governing institution. But the truth is that many people also praised them and supported their efforts to make the North a self sufficient, successful nation. I cannot say there was overwhelming support for the LTTE, but the complaints against them as an administrative body were not so different from the complaints I hear from people here in the South about the Sri Lankan Government.

Second, liberation also assumes that the liberators are preferred over the oppressors. Here is where there can be little question about the people's perceptions in the North. Almost unanimously people told me that they had little faith in the Chandrika Government and they had none whatsoever in the armed forces. While many may be diffident about the LTTE, when compared to the option of having the army come in and placing them once again under Sri Lankan control, practically everybody I talked to preferred the presence of the LTTE. You cannot be liberated by a group you feel to be more oppressive than one you are currently under. Even a man I spoke with whose life has been threatened several times by the LTTE told me things would be worse if the army came in to replace them.

I realize at this point many may suspect me of being an LTTE supporter. Please know that my only concern is for the people suffering from this conflict. I do not support the LTTE and I believe they are more concerned about power than they are about the Tamil people. But having seen both sides, and having experienced the life of the Tamil people in the army-controlled East, especially during the last three months, I can understand why they prefer the LTTE. But for the people in the South, it is necessary to understand that their brothers and sisters in the North do not see the current operation as one of liberation. Rather, they view it as further aggression and oppression by the Sri Lankan Government and the armed forces.

II. The Current Offensive is Against the LTTE and not the Tamil People

This has become the slogan for the current military campaign for 'peace.' The PA Government has emphasized repeatedly that it does not view the Tamil people as the enemy and that the current offensive is targeted against the LTTE. To go along with this, it has been reported that the government has given its troops strict instructions to avoid civilian casualties. The army is not to consider any target which may endanger civilian life. In their leaflets and broadcasts, the army has sent this message to the people in the North, assuring them they are not the target of the current attack.

Here again, my conversations with people in the North strongly suggest that this is not the case. It must be known very clearly that the Tamil people in the North are terrified of the Sri Lankan armed forces. Not only do they feel that most soldiers believe that they all are Tigers, but they also believe that most soldiers are communal minded and will use any opportunity they get to inflict suffering on the Tamil people. No matter what assurances they may receive from the Government, the people will see any attack of the Sri Lankan army as an attack upon them.

Further, it must be remembered that the people in the North have very little faith left in the Government. Many told me that they perceived little or no difference between this government and the past, the government that referred to the Tamil people as creepers on the Sinhala tree. Most of them will see

any Government claim that it is attacking the LTTE and not them as mere propaganda designed to placate concerned groups in the South as well as the international community. They reminded me that no government in the past has said that it is waging war on the Tamil people, and yet they have invariably felt themselves to be the targets of state sponsored attacks.

While a lot of this feeling may be due to LTTE propaganda, we should briefly explore why some people may feel this way. First it is very rare historically that the Tamil people have been treated well by the armed forces. The many well-documented cases of retaliation by the armed forces are evidence enough in that direction. Second, the Tamils in the North are not unaware of the human rights abuses that have taken place in the East during the five years that they have been shut off. They know that even now the army is prone to use them as human shields and objects of retaliation (not to say the LTTE treatment in the East has been significantly better). Third, the current offensive has included heavy bombing and shelling that is seen as largely indiscriminate. It is widely believed in Jaffna, though disputed in Colombo, that on the first day of the attack, an air force plane bombed a church, even though it was three miles from the scene of fighting and known to be filled with refugees. Also, in the first few days, civilian casualties far outnumbered the combined total of the 'enemy' casualties.

III. The Current Offensive, though Costly, is a Justified Method of Obtaining Peace

The Government has not denied that civilian casualties will occur, though it has downplayed the numbers. It has maintained all along that war is ultimately destructive both in terms of property as well as of human life, but sees the current offensive as a justified method of bringing peace to the island. Given the support that the military effort has received, it would seem that this is the opinion of the South as well. However, here the perceptions will definitely differ, and we can state this upon a very solid foundation without complicated arguments. The South only needs to perceive things briefly through the eyes of the civilians in the North. Imagine that after being the victims of violence for 17 years, somebody finally tells you that the just solution to your problem is for you to suffer one last period of very intense violence in which even more of your friends and relatives will die, and even more of your property will be destroyed. This is NOT to say that the South does not suffer as well. The loss of young life is tragic on both sides. But there is certainly an issue of degrees here. Civilian casualties in the South will be almost nil. Everybody fighting on the side of the South has chosen to do so. Most of the people currently being bombed and shelled in the North are trapped and cannot escape. Furthermore, they have been trapped for a number of years between militant, power hungry groups, neither of which is much concerned for their welfare. Is it truly justified to bring peace at their expense?

But further, from a humanitarian perspective, is this path justified? The Government has portrayed the situation as a hostage situation. While this is not completely accurate, it is true that for most of the people in the North, leaving is not an option. But logic dictates that the solution to a hostage situation is not a frontal assault. That is guaranteed to victimize the hostages, and that is exactly what is happening now. This is especially true when the weapons used are fairly indiscriminate ones such as shells and incendiary explosives. Figuratively speaking, it is true that the LTTE has helped doused the Tamil people, but it is the Government that is currently lighting the match.

IV. The Current Offensive Will Create the Conditions for Peace

While I heard a wide variety of opinions from people in the North, there is one question they all essentially agreed on: "What will happen if the army invades the North?" Everyone told me it would be disastrous. Not only would it result in a virtual massacre of civilian life, but it would so embitter the people in the North against the Government that coexistence would become impossible. As one person said, it would cement

the Eelam ideology. If this offensive continues, the Government will be faced with two choices. Either crush the remaining Tamil people and finally provide them the peace of the grave, or grant them independence. The current offensive will not create the conditions for peace.

Shortly, the Government is to release its political package. For whom? The people that clamoured for a just political system currently see themselves as being attacked by the Government. To accept any solution under those conditions would be seen as being beaten into submission. That is a far cry from peace with dignity, the only peace we should consider. To ignore this fact is to admit that the release of the package is nothing but a political ploy to assuage the majority community, a fraction of the Tamil population, and the international community. No honest supporter of peace with justice can support this.

And finally, we must ask if, even then, will the island have peace? Will Tamil militancy be defeated or merely further inflamed? Will the LTTE, which is using the situation in the North to gain further control in the East, fade away into dejected defeat? The Package may be passed, but peace will be further away than ever, and the people will have suffered even more. ■

HOME-LANDS, BORDER ZONES AND REFUGEES: FACTS, FICTIONS, DISPLACEMENTS¹

Darini Rajasingham

Eelam is a killing field for our politics, A battle field for India, a grave yard for our people.

(Graffiti signed by the University of Jaffna at the Rajini Thiranagama Commemoration, Jaffna, November 1989 (photograph in *Someone Else's War* by the University Teachers for Human Rights Jaffna)

Over the past decade Sri Lanka's borders have moved. Today refugee camps and military camps alternatively plot a new perimeter across this island whose national airline still offers a forlorn promise of "paradise". Geographically, the new border stretches in a gentle arch from East to West—further south on the coasts and further north inland. In some places it extends over miles—traversing lush vegetation or the dusty plains and scrub jungle of the dry zone. This border is the invention of twelve years of war between successive Sri Lanka Governments and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. It constitutes a swathe of land between territory controlled by the Sri Lanka government and the LTTE.

Ethnically, the border comprises one of the most diverse areas outside the city of Colombo. Culturally, it is a space where war and peace resonate in curious ways. The boundary has its own (hidden) economy of fear, cooperation and co-existence: the Sri Lanka army, LTTE cadres, villagers and other big players in the conflict sometimes maintain an uneasy truce. Enemies sometimes cooperate for the good of others—particularly refugees and civilians—and for personal profit. At other times it is in these zones that war is most bitterly fraught. It is in this swathe of land that the bloodiest memories of massacres that perpetuate the logic of blood for blood are rooted.

The emergent border constitutes a "no man's land" (sic), and is hence also a space of conceptual possibility. Borders, zones where conventional categories are interrupted, inverted, and blurred as many recent theorists of culture crossings have noted "are good to think" (with). In this instance, the border is not all literary conceit—its existence has real implications for how any political solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is worked out. Along this border villages have appeared and disappeared, forests turn villages and return to wilderness,