

TRAGEDY OF THE 'BORDER' VILLAGES

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Driving along the metalled road A11 from Polonnaruwa towards Batticaloa, the immediate sense is that the area bordering the motorway is sparsely populated. Scattered here and there are small clusters of mud huts and occasional hamlets. The road winds its way to the East parallel to the rail track bordered sometimes by jungle and sometimes by rice paddies, some planted and some fallow. In the aftermath of the rains, the foliage is lush.

We were looking for the village of Boatta. Two Kilometres south of Welikanda was a sign post directing us to the village. Barely a kilometre from the main road over the rail track nestled the abandoned village, its homes, mainly semi-permanent structures, dotting a cleared area bordered by thick jungle. The road led to one of the few permanent structures - the Boatta Prathamika Vidyalaya. Here in two long school halls were 38 families, all of them seeking shelter and refuge in the aftermath of a brutal attack on their village by the LTTE, eight days previously.

The school had been converted to a Welfare Centre following an attack on the village by suspected LTTE cadres on the night of 21 October.

Scattered round the clearing torn from the jungle were little mud huts, all of them now deserted. The huts were sparsely furnished, indeed barely furnished at all. A few rush mats rolled in a corner; a few clay cooking utensils, a wooden bench or chair, a few clothes folded in a heap. The huts themselves were barely 12 foot square and consisted of living space and cooking space. All of them looked equally poor and derelict. Many of the huts were now also marked by the hand of death and destruction. Battered wooden doors hardly able to keep the wind out of meagre interiors were no barrier for a group of marauding assailants. Some of them bore the marks of scores of bullet holes. In other places, wattle and daub walls were riddled. The paths criss crossing the huts were strewn with bullets bearing mute testimony to the brutality and ferocity of the attack sustained by the village. But bullets were not the only source of destruction. Some of the homes had heaps of blood soaked clothes; here the victims had been cut and hacked to death.

In all, 36 villagers perished in the midnight attack. Ranging in age from 80 to 2 years, the carnage left 16 children and teenagers, 13 women and 7 men dead; 32 of them Sinhalese, 4 Tamil.

The attack also displaced all the villagers. Since daybreak on the 22nd, varying numbers of villagers had sought shelter in the village school. At the time of our visit - it was almost lunch time - a few women were cooking at open fire places in the school yard. In the immediate aftermath of the attack 102 families had sought shelter here. Eight days later there were only 38 left. The first to leave the

'camp' were the few Tamil villagers who were taken away to 'safer' shelter by the Police. A large number of the Sinhala villagers had also apparently fled to safer locations with family or friends. Others arrived at the school at nightfall, seeking some measure of security from the police guardpost situated a few yards away from the school. The 'camp' was managed by the Mahaweli Authority and the Police; its inmates were provided with dry rations to the value of Rs.210/- to cover a period of seven days.

The police guard post, beyond the school, was manned at the time by about 15 policeman from the Welikanda Police division. These policeman were newly arrived and could not give us any details of the attack. They had replaced the previous complement of policemen, apparently numbering about 30, who allegedly were not at their posts on the night of the attack.

Both the police and the villagers seem to have been somewhat certain that the village, being multi-ethnic in composition, would be spared a direct attack by the LTTE. Indeed the Sinhala villagers appeared still shocked that the village had become a target. Many of them spoke of having felt secure because of the presence of Tamils among them. A peace committee set up in the village to discuss matters of security had also included Tamil representatives. No one was sure of exact numbers but we were told that Boatta had around 200 families of which about 140 were Sinhalese and the rest Tamil. Most of the villagers were settled here about ten years ago by the Mahaweli Authority. They were almost all landless peasants relocated due to floods and/or ethnic conflict. Most of them hailed originally from the districts of Polonnaruwa, Batticaloa and Vavuniya. Inter-marrying had taken place over the years and the villagers spoke of a shared community life, abject poverty and hardship seemingly overriding ethnic and caste differences.

That delicately balanced social fabric, a positive reflection of inter-dependent ethnic harmony, has now been shattered to smithereens. Only the Sinhalese are left here today. Beset by fear and paranoia and mounting distrust, giving vent to every form of ethnic bias, exaggerating differences and forgetting all commonalities and shared empathy, they speak bitterly of betrayal. Convinced that their Tamil neighbors deliberately singled them out for brutal attack, the Sinhalese ask why only their homes were attacked, how the attackers were able to identify them so accurately, why the Tamils were spared, where the bulk of the Tamils had fled to after the attack. Some of them swear to being able to identify former Tamil neighbors among the attackers; others say they were called out to by name; yet others insist that some of the Tamil villagers fled into the jungle with the LTTE. They are today convinced of one thing, they will never trust a Tamil again nor share a village with them. The few Tamils still in the vicinity of the village are those married to Sinhalese. A Sinhalese woman from one such family was apologetic that her

brother was married to a Tamil. She was quick to 'reassure' her Sinhala friends that the marriage was a mistake and that the family will see to it that the couple leaves the village. Belonging to neither 'camp', these will be outcasts, slowly but surely made to feel 'traitors' by both sides. Those who sought to put personal relationships before ethnicity, religion and language now face a future of perpetual limbo.

On walking through the village it was apparent that the homes were selectively targeted. Homes that we were told belonged to Tamils were untouched while others standing beside them and belonging to Sinhala families bore the marks of attack.

The bitter antipathy with which the Sinhala villagers spoke of the Tamils who had until then lived amongst them in apparent good will and harmony was most troubling. They were now adamant that all mixed villages in the area were at risk simply because Tamils were living in them. Ethnic tensions in the area were obviously high and this incident has without doubt left a deep scar on the memories of those affected, opening a yawning abyss between the communities that may not be bridged for generations to come.

The people were not at all certain that their security was assured by the presence of a revamped police guard in the village. They were terrified to return to their homes, which were so close to the jungle. Some of them requested that huts be built along the main road, while others suggested that a common place such as the Primary school building be used at night time by all the villagers and that adequate security be provided to guard it from attack. None of these measures however seemed to inspire any sense of confidence. A question also asked was how they could return to cultivate their plots of land in safety. These fears were further acerbated by an attack on the afternoon of the 28th on the adjoining village of Monerattenne.

Other villages in the area had suffered the same fate, as we found out when we visited the camp set up for displaced persons at the Kebetigollawa Madya Maha Vidyalaya.

At the time of our visit, the camp housed approximately 3000 persons. The displaced villagers had begun arriving at the camp site on the 26th and the 27th. About 4000 persons had sought shelter there after the attacks on three villages in the Kebbetigollawa DS division on the nights of the 25th and 26th. The villages attacked were Thammannawa (7 dead), Herathhalmillawa (16 dead) and Talgahawewa (2 dead).

On speaking to the inmates we discovered that families from 15 villages, gripped by fear after these attacks, had sought shelter in the town. A number of people were living with friends and relatives in safer locations, while the bulk were camping at the Kabettigollawa school. The villages abandoned included, Herathhalmillawa, Yakawewa, Indigollawa, Thammannawa, Halmillawatiya, Talgahawewa, Mahanikawewa, Wehara, Halmillawa, Morakawa, Kunchuttuwa, Kalapulliankulama, Paalugalmillawatiya, Mada Wewa and Kolibandawa.

Attack on Thammannawa

The village of Thammannawa was attacked just before dawn on Thursday the 25th of October. According to a witness, the LTTE announced their presence and began to shoot. The villagers fled to the jungle on hearing gunfire. They report seeing groups of armed men who also set ablaze their abandoned homes. On returning to the village once the firing ceased it was discovered that almost all the homes were burnt down. The few homes standing had their goods piled up in the middle of the house smoldering and charred. Seven persons, all of them Sinhalese, four men and three women, were killed in the shooting. One family of two children lost their father of 39 years. The family of a school teacher lost six members - three women and three men. The villagers also reported that livestock were shot dead.

After the attack, the villagers comprising 94 families fled to Kebetigollawa and sought refuge in the premises of the school. Most of the homes in the village were looted and torched or were in flames after the attack.

The people of Thammannawa report that the LTTE are present and active in the jungles bordering the village. The LTTE had entered the outskirts of the village a number of times in the weeks preceding the attack. Two villagers had been abducted and later returned with a warning to keep silent. The village Headman had requested police protection for the village two days before the attack but no security measures had been in place when the attack occurred. The village had no homeguards or a police post. The village is presently being guarded by a post of 10 to 12 soldiers with the assistance of about 25 home guards. The villagers now request the continuation of such 'protective' measures and request that they be given training in self defence. Returning to the village will be dependent on how secure they feel and how quickly their destroyed homes can be re-built.

What was the Motive ? What was the Result?

To all intents and purposes the killings were senseless, brutal acts of war. In attempting to find some convoluted sense to these massacres, (10 of which occurred in October at various levels of intensity) some of the theorists see motives of revenge; others destabilisation of the 'border' areas and dislocation of settlements perceived to be part of Sinhala colonisation. Other more cynical observers have also alluded to motives of deliberate provocation, indicating that an ethnic backlash particularly against the Tamils by the Sinhalese will help to strengthen a weakening *raisonne d'etat* for the LTTE.

From the point of view of the State, these are villages that need to be secured, territory that needs to be defended in an ever shifting demarcation of 'borders' between 'cleared' and 'uncleared' areas. While a battle is being waged for Jaffna, the heart of LTTE territory, the straggling body of land in the East is slowly but surely being infiltrated and destabilised by the LTTE. The land expanse here is

vast and scattered with thick swathes of jungle, ideal for guerilla warfare, the arena of LTTE competence. Securing these areas is however a staggering task; the villages are isolated; most of the approach roads are unsafe from dusk to dawn; jungle surrounds them affording shelter to the LTTE; the area is vast and distances between villages great. It will require the deployment of large numbers of security and police personnel to accord 'conventional' protection. The methods now being resorted to are the creation of civil defence units in the villages and the arming of civilian homeguards. Both methods have been tried and have failed. While unarmed civil defence units have been discussing village security and advocating precautionary measures to be taken in case of attack, this has been no defence. The establishment and posting of home guards have also not helped. The guards are poorly trained and their equipment old and ineffective. The arming of homeguards while securing nearly no protection to the villages may only provide a 'justifiable' target to the LTTE, permitting them to argue that such villagers are not 'non-combatants'. Irrespective of the motivation behind the establishment of a homeguard, it puts entire villages at

risk - an armed homeguard being as difficult to identify amidst non-combatant civilians as an LTTE cadre in similar locations.

The fundamental question here is the targeting of civilian populations by the LTTE as a means of destabilisation, dislocation, creating distrust and division among ethnic communities and the capture of territory. It is a strategy that has proved effective and will be used again.

The root causes of the ethnic conflict are political in nature. Their eradication needs a political solution. The failure, indeed the abdication of responsibility to seek such a solution by both Sinhala and Tamil political leadership over the years led to the employment of militant tactics that have today become the motive force for continued violence. The Sri Lankan polity is thus caught in a trap of violence and counter violence, with increasing distrust. The time is now to begin a process that will lead to a solution that is both just and non destructive. A sane and dispassionate evaluation needs to be made of the cost of war and the benefits of peace. ■

MOTHER COURAGE'S SONG

When courage fails, when hopes are fading,
Think on the victory ahead,
For war is but a kind of trading:
Instead of cheese, it deals in lead.

Some have done deeds they took a pride in,
Some slyly sought their lives to save:
With care they dug a hole to hide in,
But merely dug an early grave.

How many brave fire, hail and thunder,
In hope to reach a quiet shore,
Who, when they get there, only wonder
Exactly what they braved them for.

Bertolt Brecht
Translated by
W.H. Auden