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THE OUTRAGE AT THAMPALAKAMAM - THE HIDDEN REALITY

New Power Relations

Night of 31st January

Thampalakamam 4th February, Golden Jubilee of Independence

THE OUTRAGE AT THAMPALAKAMAM - THE HIDDEN REALITY

The incident which marred the observance of Sri Lanka's fifty years of independence was of a kind far less frequent today, although not unusual in the course of the ongoing war. Although the tragedy took place three days earlier, it was blacked out to such an extent that the bulk of the people did not know about it as they observed independence day on 4th February. The last major massacre of Tamil civilians by the security forces in the Trincomalee District took place two years ago during February 1996 in Kumarapuram, Kiliveddy. Although testimony of complicity by the battalion commander was received by the late MP, A. Thangathurai, it is some low ranking soldiers who are facing charges in the uncompleted trial. The cold blooded murder of 5 detainees at the Customs Road prison on 30th October 1996 in the heart of Trincomalee town, after some hard - core LTTE detainees made their escape, was totally covered up. Other isolated incidents from time to time have also gone uninvestigated. Thus the present incident must also be seen in the general context of prevailing impunity. [See our [bulletin No. 10](#) of February 1996 and [Special Report No. 8](#) of March 1997.]

The core facts of the present incident are not hard to ascertain and have been covered in the Tamil press (eg. Virakesari) in the last two days. In summary (see below for a more complete account) policemen in three camps near the Tamil villages of Puthukkudiyiruppu and Potkerni spent the night of Saturday 31st January in a drinking orgy and fired mostly into the air throughout the night. Although inebriated in the morning (1st February), apparently in a bid to cover up the misdemeanour, the police cooked up the story of an LTTE attack and launched a round up in the morning with the help of home guards from Sinhapura and Jayapura - two neighbouring Sinhalese settlements established by the late Brigadier Lucky Wijerratne soon after the re-commencement of war in June 1990. [This Aspect will be central to what follows.] This round up amounted to beating up civilians with unrestrained violence, at the end of which 8 civilians aged 14 upwards were taken to the police station and murdered in a brutal manner. The action was totally unprovoked.

Early official reports broadcast (and not subsequently corrected) were to the effect that there had been an LTTE attack in the area and that those killed were LTTE cadre. Well placed sources in Trincomalee town assured us that there was no attempt at a cover up and in fact leading security officials in Trincomalee believed initially the police version from Thampalakamam. The next morning (2nd) Nihal Karunaratne, SSP Kantalai, Sanath Nannayakara, SP Kantalai and Thampalakamam Divisional Secretary M.P. Wijesooriya

visited the villages. Nihal Karunaratne, is said to have given an assurance that a full investigation is being made by 3 independent police teams. When contacted by us today (4th February), Mr. M. Sivasithamparam, President, TULF, said that Brigadier Nihal Jayakody who is in charge at Trincomalee, had sounded firm on the law taking its course. Asked if he was satisfied, Mr. Sivasithamparam replied that ‘we will have to wait and see’. Asked for the president’s response, he said that she had not so far responded to his missive. Judicial circles in Trincomalee saw no impediment at present to a fair hearing . In the villages themselves a fear of reprisals remains.

The funerals on the morning of 4th February were attended by SSP and SP, Kantalai, who gave further assurances to the villagers. Our purpose in presenting this report is not so much to present the facts of the case as to address the deeper underlying problem that may be lost in the course of concentrating on criminal culpability.[\[Top\]](#)

New Power Relations

These are to do with the present ethnic conflict and the transformation of power relations resulting from state aided Sinhalese colonisation in parts of the North - East. This is particularly acute in the Trincomalee District. [See our [Reports 11 & 12](#) of 1993 in addition to the earlier documents cited.] We had stated forcefully that this problem needs to be addressed justly and courageously. Even the present government which has gone a long way to present the outlines of a political solution has so far failed to take even token steps in addressing the problem even in such an outrageous instance as Weli Oya [our [Special Report No. 5](#) of 1993 & [Bulletin No. 5](#) of January 1995]. Unless this problem is addressed urgently, a political settlement that brings peace can hardly become a reality.

The problem of colonisation was raised by Tamil leaders nearly 50 years ago, in the wake of independence. Thampalakamam is yet another classic instance of some of the worst fears coming true:- viz. State sponsored colonisation of Sinhalese --> administrative aggression and communal violence against minority communities --> marginalisation and eviction of minorities. We have also tried to point out the large extent to which this experience, both actual and anticipated, has contributed to the ongoing conflict. Kantalai which lies upstream of Thampalakamam became largely Sinhalese through state sponsored colonisation in the 50s. About 30 Tamils were killed during the 1977 communal violence which resulted in several of the better off Tamils leaving the area. Thampalakamam is now going through that process. People who for generations had regarded Thampalakamam as their home, suddenly find themselves powerless in a hostile environment with all forces ranged against them.

To illustrate the undercurrents resulting from the combined atrocity of the police and Sinhalese home guards from the new settlement , the older folk want the police replaced by the army. In contrast a dozen of youths asked a social worker, ‘**Rather than stay at home and get killed, should we not join the Tigers and at least die fighting?**’. The social worker admitted that he was at a loss.[\[Top\]](#)

Post June 1990

Further to earlier steps taken under the Jayewardene regime to demographically transform Trincomalee District from the late 70s, decisive but short-sighted steps to transform the character of Thampalakamam were taken soon after June 1990. This was when the LTTE broke off its marriage of convenience with the Premadasa regime and resumed hostilities.

Brigadier Lucky Wijeratne settled Sinhalese encroachers, along the Thampalakamam - Trincomalee Road [see note below] many of whom were displaced from around the place during the Indian Army's presence. Near Thampalakamam Jayapura was established to the east of the road (125 allotments of 20 perches) and Sinhapura to the west of the road (75 allotments of 20 perches) on 10 acres of teak forest reserve that was cleared for that purpose. The Brigadier also prevailed upon an NGO to build several houses for them with the rehabilitation ministry providing part of the funds.

In the meantime most Tamil civilians fled the area upon the LTTE's withdrawal after provoking the army's wrath through the killing of hundreds of servicemen who surrendered. For the first time under the cover of hostilities, Thampalakamam began to be treated as a Sinhalese AGA (now DS) division, with the appointment of a Sinhalese as AGA(now DS) . Symbolically Captain Nanayakkara who was in charge of the local army camp took building materials from the NGO to put up a prominent Buddhist shrine at Thampalakamam junction.

Later several of the displaced Tamils from Thampalakamam lived in a refugee camp at the Pillaiyar Kovil. While houses were being built for the newly settled Sinhalese, nothing was done for the Tamils. During 1991 the camp was closed and they were asked to return to their villages. Fearing for their security they used the money provided for temporary shelter to put up big cadjan sheds in selected compounds where 5 or more families lived together. This situation still prevails to a large extent at the two villages concerned in the incident.

Having the backing of the state and the security forces, the Sinhalese villagers at Sinhapura and Jayapura became overlords in the local context. In other ways their being a privileged community was illusory. They were an underclass distinguished also by caste. The state offered nothing for their social upliftment. They had no viable employment or means on 20 perches of land. Many of the men found employment as armed home guards and made a further income by chopping wood from the teak reserve and selling it as firewood. Their real role was to be low cost human shields for the security forces.

[Note: Although encroachment is common among landless peasants of all communities in the country as a whole, Sinhalese encroachment in Trincomalee was backed by powerful agents having state patronage, who held out promises of resources and jobs to be provided by the state (eg: “ new state and private enterprises). By contrast state violence has been used to uproot counter encroachments by minorities. Examples of this are the forced mass transportation of Hill Country Tamils under cover of the July 1983 violence. These Tamils were already refugees from the 1977 communal violence (Rep. No 11). See also the forced eviction of Muslims from Aakuwatte, Uppuveli under cover of the outbreak of hostilities in June 1990. ([Special Rep. No. 8](#)).] [\[Top\]](#)

Night of 31st January

Army ranks in Trincomalee were thinned down for operations in the North and at the time of the incident there was the main police camp at Thampalakamam junction. From the junction going eastwards towards the Tamil villages and the bay, there were two further mini police camps within 700 yards. It is these camps that were involved in the incident. Beyond a mile there is another major police camp. There are also police camps in Sinhapura and Jayapura. The police camp at Monkey Bridge (Palampottaru) and the Army camp at the 96th mile post are a considerable distance away. According to local information the LTTE hardly comes to the villages. Their movements are in the jungles to the west or further east towards the coast.

During the last year they have visited the villages on two occasions and had called for the youths to join them. Hardly anyone went.

On the evening of 31st January the police at the 3 camps near the villages acquired a huge quantity of illicit liquor and a large number of chickens from local residents. In the night they began a drunken feast which was followed by continuous automatic firing throughout the night, mostly into the air. At 5.30 in the morning the police along with the home guards at Sinhapura and Jayapura, many of whom were armed with automatic weapons, commenced a round up of the two Tamil villages. What followed was mainly a orgy of assault. Many people were pulled out of their houses and were very badly beaten. Women too were not spared. The armed men also opened fire at chickens and animals. Two cows and about five dogs were killed in this manner. Among the several people badly assaulted is John de Pinto(48) who was beaten till he fell on the ground and was then trampled with boots on his chest. Suresh (18) was kicked in the genitals, trampled on the chest and was injured on the forehead. He now suffers from giddiness. Some others badly affected are Jeyarajah, Thiagarajah, Patkunam and Subramaniam. A number of people were detained and marched towards the police station. The families followed in alarm. The police chased away the families saying that those taken would be questioned and released. Some of those taken were subsequently released including Uthayan(32), a school master, who was one among the two who testified before the magistrate on 3rd February . Eight persons were taken into the police station. A burst of gun fire was subsequently heard and the people concluded that the worst had happened. From the state of the bodies later it was clear that several of them had been badly tortured. One corpse had about 25 bullets in it. The male organ was missing from another corpse suggesting that it was severed before the final killing took place. The 8 persons killed in this manner are: 1.) Ponnambalam Kanagasabai(48), father of 5 children, 2.) Arumugam Segar(32), whose first child was 31 days old on that day. 3.) Gunaratnam Sivarajah(27), 4.) Subramaniam Thivakaran (23), sat for O.Levels and awaiting results. 5.) Muruges Janakan(17), Grade 9 (pre O.Level) student. 6.) Amirthalingam (14), Grade 9 student. 7.) Amirthalingam Gajendran(17), elder brother of 6., working to support the family. 8.) Nathan Pavalanathan(33), married.

At about 8. 30 a.m., following the incident, those who tried to enter the area were dissuaded by the police who claimed that there had been an LTTE attack during the night. This was apparently believed by the leading security officials in Trincomalee. However, word of the true state of affairs got through to Trincomalee that morning and Mr. Sornarajah, the magistrate, visited the area and wanted the bodies to be transferred to the Trincomalee hospital for post-mortem examination. The bodies instead were first sent to Kanthalai hospital. It was in the evening the following day when at the insistence of the magistrate, they were brought to the Trincomalee hospital mortuary in a state where they were already beginning to decompose. In the meantime, as mentioned earlier, leading security officials from Kantalai had visited the villages and given assurances. The magistrate heard two witnesses, including Uthayan master, on 3rd February. [\[Top\]](#)

Thampalakamam 4th February, Golden Jubilee of Independence

In the morning of this day the country's golden jubilee of independence was being observed in Colombo with pomp and ceremony appropriate to it. (The tragedy in Thampalakamam was of course blacked out from the state media and among the English papers the Mid-Week Mirror carried an account of it on 4th February. No other English or Sinhalese paper has referred to it so far.) Following the 21 gun salute, the best armour the country possessed was

paraded before the distinguished guests in the podium. There was a fly past of the best fighter aircraft the country has. In Thampalakamam there was at this time a ceremony of contrasts. At the funeral for those killed in the outrage, SSP Nihal Karunaratne and SP Sanath Nanayakkara, the leading state officials in the Kanthalai division, were in the villages to mark the occasion. Karunaratne, an elderly man from Negombo who spoke fluent Tamil, was deeply upset. He and the SP, requested some of those who had come from Trincomalee to stay close to them in order to keep the people calm. Karunaratne's demeanour could not have been more different from those of his colleagues taking part in ceremonies in Colombo. He went from house to house consoling the bereaved. He touched the surviving members of each victim's family individually and begged forgiveness. At one point he pulled out his rosary, showed the crucifix, and said, "I am an SSP. But I do not believe in the gun and I don't carry a gun. This is what I believe in and carry instead. It is far more powerful than the gun."

Seven of the bodies were then brought to the school for the funeral ceremony. (The remaining body was buried by relatives in Trincomalee.) A large crowd of nearly a thousand people with the children in school uniform were assembled. Initially there was some tension because of the presence of the police officials. However, the GS (Headman) spoke first and calmed the people. When Nihal Karunaratne spoke, he again apologised to the people as a whole, said that the policemen involved in the incident had already been transferred, and gave an assurance that this would not happen again. The crowd responded with spontaneous approval. The police officials were very frank in their discussion with some of those present. The new OIC was too introduced to the people. After the funeral some of the people pointed to two policemen passing by and said that they were involved in the incident and were supposed to have been transferred. The SSP ordered that they be arrested. There still remains a fear among the villagers that they might face reprisals if they testify and identify the culprits. There is scepticism about the transfers. The home guards who took part in the atrocity pose an entirely a different problem. They are people who live in the area and whether transferred or not, their presence would continue. Other recent events in the East too raised scepticism. Seven Muslim home guards were detained on the orders of the Kalmunai magistrate over the reprisal killing of two Tamil civilians in Veeramunai early last December. (The LTTE is said to have killed one Muslim home guard from Sammanthurai.) All seven home guards were released later following the failure of the Tamils at Veeramunai to identify any of them. Similar factors would no doubt operate in Thampalakamam as well.