

Response to the Bishop's Statement on IDPs

The Bishop of Jaffna Rev Thomas Savundaranayagam's recent statement on the Internally Displaced People (IDP) (Tamil Canadian 13.03.09) and the letter signed by all the Bishops from the northeast of Sri Lanka are both insensitive and very disappointing.

There are complex issues involved in these statements. First of all, the Bishop should have asked the Government (GoSL) to halt the attacks on innocent civilians including children, whom the GoSL treat as combatants, in order to allow much needed humanitarian aid into Vanni. Secondly, the Catholic Church in the northeast should advocate for the re-settlement of the 330,000 IDPs who are trapped between the aggressive devil and the deep blue Indian Ocean, along the beaches of Mullaitivu. Uprooting the IDPs from their land and settling them in unknown hostile environment where they treated as suspected LTTE supporters is absurd. The IDPs should be free to go where they feel secure. The Bishops should not appear to be aiding and abetting with the GoSL's cunning and sinister handling of the IDPs.

The question which is imperative that should be asked is why our indigenous Tamil brethren are displaced in the first place? They are made homeless in their own land, denied their birthrights and now humbled by living in squalid condition. They are exposed to the elements as well as to the aerial bombing. It is heartbreaking to imagine ourselves in their precarious position. The GoSL Agent in Mullaitivu has issued an alert regarding the imminent shortage of food and medicine. From their own parish priest the Bishop should be aware of the bombing on civilians within the Safe Zone. That is outrageous especially when the GoSL Defence Secretary said openly on national television that even the hospitals outside the fire free zone are targets (Sky News interview, Feb'09). According to the latest UNICEF report there are 60,000 malnourished children among the IDPs. The Bishop should have told the Christian world through the Vatican that an unprecedented tragedy is taking place in Sri Lanka. The world does not care about the Tamils in Sri Lanka as people like him have not spoken up. The Lahore ambush where eight people died got more publicity in the world press than the daily killings (40-50 people on average) taking place in SL, which is a genocide by the Sri Lanka on its own citizens.

There are many international actors who are vying and falling over each other to help Sri Lanka continue this ruthless and futile war. What is stopping the Bishop to join Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other eminent men to call for a ceasefire?

There is a danger in allowing the IDPs to join the GoSL's notorious camps. They will be kept in fenced off camps as suspected LTTE supporters, in isolation, without any contact with the outside world. The EU cautioned the GoSL handling of the war zones and the IDP camps. The Bishop should investigate the living conditions in those camps. The Bishop of Kandy, an outsider, appears to have provided a convenient exculpation for the government. When fundamental rights are denied to the citizens and human lives are at stake, the Bishops, whether they are Sinhalese or Tamil, should intervene on their behalf.

The Bishop of Mannar Rev Rayappu Joseph's handling or rather the U turn regarding the Madhu Feast in 2008 raise the doubt if the Bishops are under increasing pressure from the government. The Madhu precinct was not declared as the a safe zone as he had first insisted but instead the Feast was held for the Sinhalese pilgrims who were taken by their MPs while about 300 Tamil families were detained at Madawachchi under the suspicion of links with the freedom fighters.

The greatest commandment in the Catholic religion is to 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself'. The IDPs who are trapped in Mullaitivu are the descendants of the indigenous Tamils who inhabited the island since ancient times. When they thirst without drinking water, when they starve without food and suffer without medication, they are our true neighbours who we should care about. Recently their tarpaulin roofs over their heads were swept away by the cyclone, they are in need of clothing. When a Government, which has the duty of care to its citizen, neglects them, it is the prime duty of the Bishops either Tamil or Sinhalese to provide them. They don't seem to be listening to their inner voice. We need a spiritual leader who can distinguish the injustice that is being done to the Tamils. We desperately need a Desmond Tutu in our midst as an independent observer, going around with a spiritual lie-detector, because people's lives are at stake here. The GoSL is supposed to be the custodians of the Buddhist Dhamma but the Vanni is becoming the killing field. The island is rich in Hindu, Muslim and Christian values yet the leaders are hesitant to speak out. This is the best opportunity for the Bishop of Jaffna to break the silence.

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