

Transport and travelling restrictions bogs down booming agriculture and fisheries

Slow pick-up for Jaffna



SITUATION REPORT

SPECIAL Assignment

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IN JAFFNA

It was homecoming of sorts when he returned to Jaffna peninsula this week. After its re-capture, he held sway as the chief military man ensuring the security of the area. Major General (ret'd) Asoka Jayawardena had now arrived for the first time as Governor of the North-East.

When he sat down to a conference at the Secretariat last Tuesday, he was both familiar with the faces and places. There were military and government officials, human rights groups and representatives of various public bodies concerned with the welfare of the public and development of Jaffna.

What he heard for almost four hours not only angered but saddened him. Three and a half years after re-capture, the normalcy in the Jaffna peninsula was being threat-

ened by the slowing down of many public welfare measures. For four days he met with people to obtain details of what he learnt and flew to his main office in Trincomalee to rush an urgent report to President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

The main problem in the peninsula was the difficulty the public face in travelling to places in the rest of the country. Despite assurances of passenger vessels being introduced, nothing has been done. Only a few who could afford paid airfare and went through a lengthy procedure before being cleared to travel to Colombo and thereafter to any other area. (See story on this page)

This affected not only the Jaffna public but also representatives of foreign Governments, Non-Governmental Agencies and others involved

in development work.

It also affected the economy of the peninsula. Agriculture was booming and the yields are high. But the farmer is unable to send his produce out of the peninsula. This week, a kilo of red onions fetched only ten rupees. That was below cost of production. In Colombo it fetched Rs 80 a kilo. Bananas were aplenty. A kilo of the Ambul variety was just six rupees a kilo, the price of just two plantains in Colombo. Prawns fetched Rs 75 to Rs 100 as against a Colombo price of Rs 275. Jumbo Prawns were Rs 150 a kilo as against a Colombo price of Rs 750.

Vegetables were equally cheap. Brinjals were Rs 25 a kilo (Colombo- Rs 45), Beetroot Rs 20 a kilo (Colombo- Rs 44), Green Chillies Rs 20 a kilo (Colombo- Rs 100) Carrots Rs 20 per kilo, (Colombo-

Rs 48) The list goes on.

Items not produced in the peninsula are, however, expensive. Potatoes were Rs 110 a kilo (Colombo - Rs 30), Coconut Rs 25 to 45 per nut (Colombo- Rs 12 to Rs 14). Some farmers who brought their produce to the market abandoned what was not sold before returning home. This was to avoid carrying the load. A bag of cement fetched Rs 515 last week. Needless to say re-construction of war-ravaged homes would be enormously expensive.

If agriculture was the mainstay of Jaffna, the fishing industry followed as the next. There were complaints that fishermen were undergoing hardships due to restrictions placed on fishing areas and time limits being imposed. These have been done on security considerations. Rising crime, Police in-



A cycle ride home after school for children, Pix by Alfred Silva

tion, lack of inputs for agricultural/fisheries development, difficulties encountered by schools in obtaining educational aids, expansion of tel-

ephone facilities, improvement of transport services were among the long list of issues that surfaced.

How bureaucratic proce-

dures caused problems can be seen by difficulties a leading school had. For the past seven months they were involved in a process to obtain a musical

organ from Colombo. That was for use by the School Band. The request was still held over at the Ministry of Defence.