

# Renewal of ties in Jaffna. (1993, October 31) *The Sunday times.*

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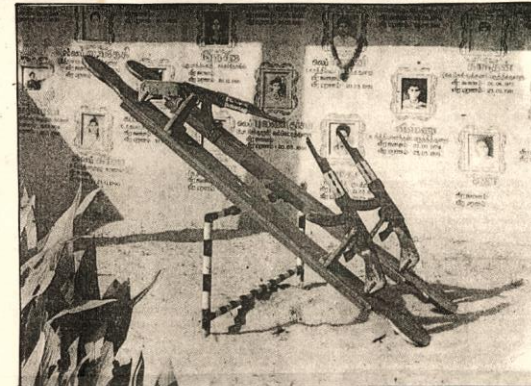
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Scarce commodity: kerosene oil being measured

Three journalists from our sister paper *Lankadipa* — Krishna Wijebandara, Thushara Gooneratne and photographer Nalin Dilruksha - braved heavy odds and dangers in a mission to the war-torn Jaffna Peninsula last week. They were the first Sinhala journalists from a daily national newspaper to visit Jaffna since Eelam War II began in July 1990. This is the first in a series of dramatic first hand reports from them.



Symbolism: T-56 rifle for see-saw handle bar

## Renewal of ties in Jaffna

The lives of these innocent people once revolved around the palmyrah tree. But today the palmyrah tree has been replaced by the AK-47 rifle and they live on a powder keg. Many of these people do not wish to run away to refugee camps where they could survive on somebody's dole and in an artificial peace. So they have decided to stay, however dangerous it may be. But their hearty for peace is suppressed by the rule of the gun. "Every horrible thing that could possibly happen has happened," say the people of Jaffna who are caught between the refugee camps and the junker. For the 800,000 people of the Jaffna peninsula, now under LTTE control, there is little cause for optimism. But they have not given up hopes for a just peace.

Despite major problems and dire warnings, we visited Jaffna last week to renew ties with our brothers and sisters who have been living in isolation since the war intensified.

Links between the north and the south had almost totally broken down after the Eelam War II which began in July 1990.

We were the first Sinhala journalists from a national daily to visit Jaffna after July 1990 and our four-day experience in Jaffna town, in LTTE camps, in the villages and on the northern beaches gave us a deeper understanding and awareness of realities.

Our mission to Jaffna was made possible through the intervention of Jaffna's Government Agent K. Manikkavasagar who made arrangements with the LTTE for the tour.

Our letter, addressed to LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, was sent to him by the GA. The reply inviting us to visit Jaffna was signed by S. Thankan on behalf of LTTE's political wing leader Thamil Selvam.

After obtaining permission from the Defence Ministry here, we set out on this tour knowing fully well the possible dangers we could encounter. Even if death stared us in the face, we were inspired by the highest ideals of our vocation to do or die. After all cowards die many times before their deaths.

Our journey was to begin on Monday, October 18, from the naval dockyard at Trincomalee on board the passenger vessel, *Nagroma*. We were scheduled to go from Trinco to Kankasanturai, then to Point Pedro and

then through ~~Marvelt~~ to Jaffna town.

Tickets for the journey are issued at the EPDP office in Trincomalee on Defence Ministry authority. The price is Rs.100, which is cheap compared to exorbitant rates reportedly levied for Kilali crossings.

For some reason our October 18 departure delayed till Tuesday, October 19.

We boarded the ship around 5 p.m. on Tuesday and as dusk set in over the war-torn areas, a sense of fear was evident among most passengers. It was like a trip into the valleys of darkness and death.

On board were civilians travelling to the islands of Kays, Mandaitivu, Naminathivu and Delft. There were also soldiers returning to the war-theatre after a holiday.

Most of the civilians were Tamils or Muslims. We, the soldiers and the crew were the only Sinhalese. Because of the racial tension created by this war, the Tamil civilians appeared to be a little suspicious or uncertain about our presence or intentions.

### A tear-drop

They were carrying, the traditional cans of coconut oil, bicycles and food items with them.

As the journey began with the ship sounding its siren, our minds naturally went to the safety of the home we were leaving behind. We thought of our colleague Gunasinha Herath and our office driver Saira who had dropped us at Trincomalee and were now probably driving back to Colombo.

Before leaving, they hugged us and said "May God protect you". Indeed that was our prayer too.

Thushara was in deep thought. When asked what he was thinking about, he replied: "I am thinking of my child." We noticed a tear-drop in the corner of his eyes.

As we proceeded, the night sky was suddenly lit-up in a flash of para-light. The initial reaction was panic but we were reassured that this was a routine naval measure to check on the movement of other vessels.

It was a sleepless night in mid-ocean. As dawn broke through the cold we saw the sun rising from the east in all its glory.

As we saw the northern land area, the happiness in some people was evident. Since Point Pedro was controlled by the LTTE, the ship was keeping a course

which was beyond the LTTE reach. It was around 6.30 a.m. on Wednesday, ~~Sahor~~ *Sahor* Sunaweera said by 7 a.m. we would arrive at KKS. We saw the now-abandoned cement factory from afar.

Along with some 14 others, we disembarked at the KKS naval base, where we saw the ship, *Merks Wadduwa*, that had come from Colombo with food under ICRC protection.

We boarded the *Merks Wadduwa*, and began our journey to Point Pedro.

With us the other 14 people, too, got on board. Among them were a university student going to Jaffna to get married, a music teacher carrying a violin and three foreigners.

In one-and-a-half hours time, we would set foot on Jaffna where few if any Sinhala people were left.

As we neared, we wondered what fate awaited us. The gunfire of Operation Val Devi was still echoing.

To re-assure ourselves, we rechecked on whether we were carrying the all important letter of authority from the LTTE.

As we approached Point Pedro, we saw a white pillar. It was an old-light house, ravaged by the war. It once guided sea-farers. Today it is a relic of the war, we could see the main road, a ~~shuifch~~, the jetty, some lorries and buildings.

We approached the Port and saw boats and barges with big-made men approaching us. They were coming to unload the food. Despite the ICRC flag and all the other reassurances, we felt like strangers. We realised how badly the bonds had been broken.

"They are journalists from Colombo," the university student who travelled with us told a person at the jetty. He approached us with the traditional Tamil greeting "Wanakkam Aiya, welcome, welcome."

He explained our credentials to the others there but only words we understood were 'paper reporters' and 'Lankadepa'. They helped us get into another ICRC boat along with the food items.

The warm welcome lifted our spirits and allied our fears.

When we reached Point Pedro jetty and stepped onto Jaffna soil, we were greeted by representatives of the GA and the LTTE. Through lorries and carts loading

food, we were guided to the LTTE office.

"Your identity cards," asked an unarmed civilian at the office with a peculiar Jaffna accent.

We produced the letter of authority from the LTTE and were told no other passes would be required. We had to register our names and we could not help but feel like 'foreigners'.

There was an old Toyota van waiting to take us from here to Jaffna town, a 22-mile journey. Nobody checked our bags.

The people we met or saw were friendly and the journey was pleasant.

Most of the city was in ruins. Buildings and houses had collapsed and people were living or working in makeshift huts. Only the name boards of shops remain.

### Children's park

The effects of the war were clearly seen on the faces of the people. The hot weather made it worse. Though the smell of hot 'wade' and 'thosay' attracted us, the scene around was not appetising. There were two or three ramshackle private buses waiting to take passengers to Jaffna. We were told the fare was Rs. 25 to 35.

Midway we saw a children's park built by the LTTE. But it carried tragic symbolism. The handle bar of the children's see-saw was an old T-56 rifle.

They play in a bunker. They play hide and seek in tunnels and trenches built for war. A Tiger statue watches them. Though it is surrounded by a flower garden, this park for children under 10 years of age was a stark reminder of the social repercussions of the war. On the walls of the park were portraits of dead LTTE men. The children of war were being trained to live in a war-like situation, we were told.

The villages we passed were deserted. They were like graveyards, with one or two haunted human beings emerging from here and there. As we proceeded, the driver told us to look ahead and see the radio tower of Palali Camp.

We asked whether we were near the army camp and driver Subramanian reassured us in broken Sinhala that we need not be afraid of the soldiers.

We approached an area which we were told was very dangerous.



Self sufficient in transport

On this death road, shells were fired around us several times. We were gripped with fear and wondered whether the army had sensed an LTTE van was passing and had decided to open fire.

It was only the skill of our driver Subramanian that brought us alive through that shower of shells to write this story for *The Sunday Times* today.

More next week