

Sri Lanka program

The Sri Lanka program of the Canadian International Development Agency as described in the article *Foreign Aid's New Targets* (June 24) is an example of "fiddling while Rome burns."

For two weeks in May I travelled, on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, around Sri Lanka visiting communities in the war-torn north and the east and in the central regions of the country. Whether one congratulates the efforts of the international aid community appears to be a matter of perspective. The view seems quite different from the beleaguered towns of the north and east than it does from the boardrooms of Colombo and Ottawa. In the Canadian High Commission offices the head of the CIDA's program in Sri Lanka told me, "While it was important to maintain pressure, the Sri Lankan government needs to be rewarded for what it has accomplished."

I wonder how these accomplishments measure up from the perspective of the 7,000 political prisoners who still languish in government detentions centres without trial. The economic accomplishments in the South hold little relevance for the thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils living in the northern province without electricity or adequate food and medicine and with no opportunity to farm or fish. To the half million people eking out an existence in temporary camps for those displaced by the ethnic conflict the satisfaction of the donor community seems at best uninformed and at worst callous.

Canada supports wholeheartedly an international aid strategy for Sri Lanka which focuses primarily on economic policies and accomplishments. Tragically, while the donors are pleased with GNP growth rates, the aspirations of the people — a political solution to the ethnic conflict, more than a cosmetic respect for human rights and democracy and a plan which ensures equitable economic development are still mirages. Canada promotes its aid program in Sri Lanka as one which promotes human rights and addressed root causes. From the northern towns of Sri Lanka and much of the rest of Sri Lanka it is hard to see the effect.

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