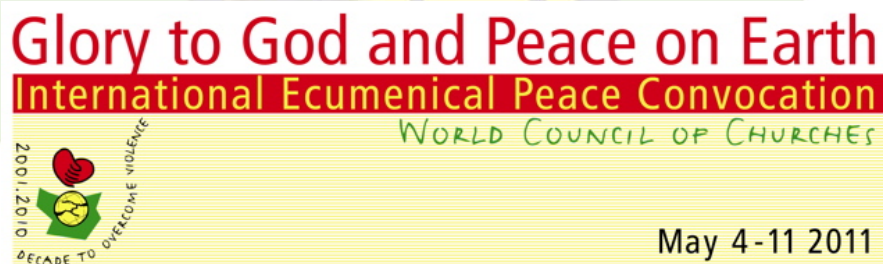


Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV)
**THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC) AND
THE NATIONAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL OF SRI LANKA (NCCSL)**

REPORT OF THE LIVING LETTERS TEAM VISIT TO SRI LANKA
3-13 August 2007

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Context of the visit: What does the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) mean to the churches living in a context of perpetual violence and periodic justice? This was the main question that the team reflected on as we traveled through Sri Lanka. This first of the Living Letters visits to the churches, in the context of the Decade to Overcome Violence, was very meaningful. The visits will strengthen the work of the churches for reconciliation and peace and will be a symbol of the solidarity of the churches around the world. At the same time the visits will give content to the proposed Declaration on Just Peace. The visits will also prepare the churches for their participation in the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation planned for 2011.

Hosts and words of thanks: We are grateful to the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL) for organizing our visit and taking care of all the details. A special word of thanks is due to Rev. Dr. Jayasiri Peiris, General Secretary, NCCSL who coordinated our visit and to Mr. Santha Fernando, the staff person responsible for the work of the Commission for Justice and Peace of the NCCSL for accompanying us and taking care of all our needs. He helped us understand the context by regularly interpreting for us what we were seeing and hearing. Our heartfelt thanks go to all the Bishops, clergy and others who we met in the troubled areas – for their courage, compassion and commitment to the people they work with. We also thank all those we met in Colombo – church leaders, the Buddhist monks and the Buddhist high priest; government ministers, members of political parties, politicians and government officials, and the representative of the UN as well as representatives of NGOs and human rights activists. Everywhere we were given time and the people we met with were kind enough to answer our many questions.

Background to Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka is indeed the pearl of the Indian Ocean – beautiful, lush and green with thick forests and rivers crisscrossing the country. Rich in history, with all that attracts tourism – amazing historic monuments, beaches with coral reefs, and wild life sanctuaries. Peacocks walk around in the wild and we even managed to see three elephants, albeit in a temple! The history and political situation of the country is complex and this introduction does not attempt to describe it in great detail.

The beauty one encounters at every turn coexists with security checkpoints, and soldiers. From the time we came out of the airport in Colombo (and increased as we traveled to the North and East), we were systematically stopped and checked. The NCCSL van proudly displays the sticker to indicate that the churches oppose guns – but most soldiers and policemen walk around with guns. The whole country is experiencing the impact of the war that has gone on, with temporary cease fires, for over two decades. The economy is under great stress, tourism has come to a virtual halt. Both an Emergency Rule in the country (1985) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979) have been tools in the hands of the government. Even NGOs are now under surveillance and are called unpatriotic if they raise any questions. The North, the South, the East and West of the island nation feels the effects of the war and faces the consequences of the insecurity in the country.

Historically, there has been both Indo-Aryan emigration from India which forms the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka today - the Sinhalese (74%); and of Tamils, the second-largest ethnic group (18%), originally from the Tamil region of India. The Sinhalese and Tamil populations have at different moments of history coexisted peacefully but have also had conflicts. The Tamils, primarily Hindus, claimed the northern section of the island and the

Sinhalese, who are predominantly Buddhist, controlled the South. In 1505 the Portuguese took possession of Ceylon until the Dutch India Company usurped control (1658–1796). The British took over in 1796, and Ceylon became an English Crown colony in 1802. The British compounded the problems by following a divide and rule policy, aggravating the tensions between the communities. Ceylon became independent of British rule in 1948, a few months after India and Pakistan became independent and the name Sri Lanka was adopted for the country. We were told that beginning with independence, the Tamil people had tried to achieve justice through democratic processes for 25 years.

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in 1956 and championed Sinhalese nationalism, making Sinhala the country's only official language and including state support of Buddhism, further marginalizing the Tamil minority. He was assassinated in 1959 by a Buddhist monk. The Tamil minority's mounting resentment toward the Sinhalese majority's monopoly on political and economic power, exacerbated by cultural and religious differences, and led to bloody violence a pogrom against the Tamils in the southern provinces of the country.

In 1976, the Tamils opted for an independent Tamil State. The younger generation of Tamils became restless and took arms to fight for the creation of this independent state - the strongest of the rebel groups is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam, (LTTE) popularly known as Tamil Tigers. This stage of the war has been going on since 1983. There was a formal cease-fire with the Tamil rebels, signed in February 2002. In September 2002, the government lifted its ban on the group, and in December 2002 LTTE agreed to explore the possibilities for a viable solution within a federal structure, of power devolution as an alternative for an independent Tamil State. But the talks did not proceed beyond December, 2002 leading to further disillusionment of the Tamils. In 2005 Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidential elections.

To add fuel to the fire, the tremendously powerful tsunami that ravaged the Sri Lankan coast in December 2004, killed over 38,000 people. There was hope for peace as the government and the Tamil Tigers reached a deal in June 2005 to share about \$4.5 billion in international aid to rebuild the country. But a verdict of the Sri Lankan Supreme Court jeopardized the aid package. In August 2005, the government declared a state of emergency. The Sri Lankan government continues to withhold the LTTE's share of the tsunami funds in the Central Bank of Sri Lanka.

The influence of the Buddhist monks has continued to dominate politics. In 2006, repeated violations of the 2002 cease-fire on both sides turned into outright war. Since April 2006, about 1,000 soldiers and civilians have been killed, and 350,000, mostly Tamils, have been displaced. Efforts by the government of Norway, which brokered the Oslo Peace Accord and cease-fire in 2002, to bring both sides to the negotiating table once again have been unsuccessful. Fighting between the rebels and government troops has continued into 2007. Earlier this year, after a week of deadly battles, the military took control of rebel-held regions of eastern Sri Lanka (Vaharai – a place the Living Letter's Team visited) leaving tens of thousands more civilians displaced. The army shelling has destroyed the houses that had been built just two years earlier following the tsunami! In April this year, the Tamil Tigers launched their first air raid, using small airplanes to bomb an air force base near Colombo.

The present government pursues the conviction of a unitary form of government and does not support a form of power sharing or federalism that has been proposed.

We were told by many in the North and East that while they do not approve of violence, the LTTE is the only answer to their problems. We were told that there are human rights violations by both the LTTE and the government – the splintering of the militant LTTE has led to the increased forced conscription of young men and women, particularly by the breakaway faction led by Karuna and his newly formed Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP). There are reports that the government has provided protection and military aid to Karuna and his cadres to assist them in their fight against LTTE cadre. Karuna, who was the Tigers' senior commander in the east, defected and formed the TMVP in April 2004. Muslims, who are mostly Tamil speaking have their own demands for semi-autonomous status in the Eastern province.

OUR PROGRAMME:

Our ten-day programme was intense and rich. We traveled all across the country. After a briefing in Colombo from the General Secretary of the NCCSL and the Commission for Justice and Peace as well as the Centre for Policy Alternatives we traveled by road to Mannar and from there to Vaharai and Batticloa. We traveled back to Colombo and after three hours of rest we flew to Jaffna early the next morning for a two day visit. In these visits we met with people at the grassroots, fisher folk, widows, human rights groups, NGOs, government agents, as well as interfaith and citizens committees. In each place our visits were organised by the local bishops and clergy working with the people. The remainder of the time we spent in Colombo to debriefing with church leaders and the NCC and meeting with government ministers, the Chief Buddhist Priest of the Belanwila Temple, members of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU which is the Buddhist monks led political party that has a strong influence on the government) and a UN official. What follows is a record of the team's visit.

Colombo

COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, NCCSL: Our visit began with a meeting with the Commission for Justice and Peace, NCCSL. Introducing the team to the present context, the Chairperson of the Commission Mr. M.A.Sumanthiran, (Attorney at Law) and members of the Commission gave us an update on the fresh waves of violence that followed the election of the new President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapakse in November 2005. They told us that the general climate of the country is one of increased militarization; massive internal displacement of populations; abductions of citizens in the capital in spite of high security; and fresh waves of violence to “clear” the LTTE held areas of the country. Both the government and the LTTE frequently violated the 2002 peace accord - the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) - which had come into effect in February that year.

The challenge to the churches is to work for a negotiated peace settlement which will lead to a just sharing of power with the Northern and Eastern provinces of the country. Tragically, the general opinion is that a peaceful settlement to the problem is impossible and too many people put faith in a military solution. The government, the army and the ruling political parties claim that a military victory to overcome the militant group is possible. Only the churches and some movements are speaking of a peaceful political solution to the problem.

The churches are unfortunately also divided on ethnic lines and are too often unable to speak together. However, in many actions on the ground they do cooperate – Protestant, Roman Catholic and Evangelical groups have come together for common action. Christianity is seen as an external force and the Sinhala-Buddhist nexus threatens religious freedom. The constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place," though it is not recognized as the state religion. The constitution also provides for the right of members of other faiths to freely practice their religion. While the Government publicly endorses this right, in practice there were problems in some areas.

Anti-conversion legislation first introduced in 2004 remained under consideration. In May 2004, Buddhist monks led JHU presented to parliament a bill that would criminalize "unethical" conversions. On May 6, 2005, despite a Supreme Court ruling that some sections of the bill were unconstitutional, the JHU presented the bill for a second reading. Subsequently, the proposed bill was referred to a special parliamentary committee, which met for the first time in April 2006. The bill remains under consideration. In recent years the JHU has aligned closely with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna JVP, (People's Liberation Front) which began as a leftist party in 1971 and has more recently turned into a chauvinistic party too.

CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES: (CPA) “What you have in Sri Lanka is a government committed to war and an LTTE which has the same philosophy”, said Pakiasothy Saravanamuthu the Director of the CPA. His colleague Rohan Edirisinghe who is also a member of the CJP of the NCCSL, was also present and contributed to the discussion. This climate of war has a negative impact on people’s human rights and the humanitarian situation. The Centre for Policy Alternatives was formed in 1996 with the firm commitment to strengthen the vital contribution of civil society to the public policy debate. Focusing primarily on issues of governance and conflict resolution, CPA is committed to programmes of research and advocacy through which public policy is critiqued, alternatives

identified and disseminated. For example they have developed critical commentaries on the Presidential Commission of Inquiry and the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons appointed to investigate into grave human rights violations from August, 2005 to September, 2006.

They spoke of the impact of the war on the economy, the setting aside of some places as high security zones (HSZ), prevents the people from pursuing their occupations – such as fishing and agriculture. International financial aid from Japan, China and India is sustaining the government (only India imposes conditions on its aid). Sri Lanka's external debt stood at \$12.23 billion in 2006. The LTTE has its own international network, largely based on the Tamil diaspora. The government has to provide a meaningful proposal for peace – only this will bring peace. CPA feels that only some form of a federal structure will provide a framework for a settlement – unfortunately neither the present government nor the LTTE supports this. So it is a complete revamp of the Constitution that is required.

Mannar

CATHOLIC BISHOP OF MANNAR, BP. RAYAPPU JOSEPH: “If we do not succeed in overcoming violence, we as a Church have failed”, said the bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Mannar. He noted that 90% or more of the people of this country do not want violence and underlined that the violence and human rights violations of both sides need to be condemned. He believes that the pluralistic nature of the country has to be protected and that the only hope is for the government to make a proposal and take the steps for peace. From his perspective this is more the responsibility of the government than that of the militant group. He said that the 2002 peace accord was broken because the government did not keep its commitment to develop the eastern province. The government has repeatedly shown a lack of will to provide a solution to the problem. He agreed that the militant group has made its mistakes but he does not think it is right to blame the LTTE for everything. He said that a strong body with the power to monitor the peace process and any human rights violations is needed. He felt that all parties should sit together and have a positive dialogue and work out ways to share power.”

He added that the Church has a key role to play in bringing peace and reconciliation. On their part, the Bishop said that his Diocese has maintained good relations with leaders of other faiths, with the government, with the military and with the leaders of the LTTE. The Bishop has also negotiated with the army to open the Medawachchi-Mannar road to allow devotees to attend the annual Madhu festival. The ten-day religious festivities at the 450-year-old Catholic shrine of the St. Mary’s Church in Madhu of the Mannar district attract thousands of pilgrims from all over the island, every year. Rt. Rev. Dr. Rayappu Joseph has come to an understanding with the government to open the “uncleared” area on the Madhu Road from August 10 to 17, 2007. He sees this as an opportunity for communities to meet each other and to build peace.

MANNAR DIOCESAN CENTRE - (Caritas, Mannar): The meeting started with a minute of silence remembering all the victims of the conflict. The people present at the meeting were mainly widows and widowers who lost their loved ones in the war; some of them have settled in Mannar after fleeing conflict areas. The testimonies mainly focussed on cases of killings, executions, abductions, disappearances and displacements. When asked what they were aspiring for, they all held on to a common hope for peace to come back soon before more are brutalised.

A man told us that his 22 year old son was in a bus leaving Mannar to join the University of Colombo; on his way, the bus was hit by a bomb, and the son died on the spot. The family got a mere USD450 as compensation. Now the parents are afraid to risk sending their younger son to University. A woman explained that her husband was shot by the army in 1990 while he was at the market in Jaffna; subsequently, she moved to Mannar with her 2 children who were three years old and eight months when her husband had died. Another woman said her brother was missing since October 22, 1987 – he had come from Jaffna to visit her in Mannar, and on his way home, he was arrested by the police. Although the police claim that they have released him, she has heard no news of him since his arrest. Therefore, she has filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission (HRC) with the help of the priests from the Diocesan Centre.

A widow told us that her husband died on May 2, 1999 in a landmine explosion while working on their land. Another widow, just 28 years old, said that her husband had been shot dead by the army in September 2006 on his way home from work. She has three children (10 months, 3 and 6 years old) and she is now living with her father who is very old. Another widow said her husband went missing on July 2004 as he was shopping in the bazaar. She now lives alone with her 3 children. A woman told us that her son was shot dead in 1988 by the Indian Peace Keeping Forces. Another woman told us that her husband was shot dead in 2000 by the army in a rice field where he was working. The army took the body and the parish priest had to intervene so that she could get his body back. She now lives with her four children. A father said that on February 28, 2007, as he was driving his motorbike with his wife and two children, a land mine exploded and all four were wounded; they are still under treatment. A man testified that in 1993, his son was hanged on a tree by the army; they then shot him and his head was cut off head. The head was found five days later in another area. Another woman told us that her daughter was killed in an aerial bombing in 1988.

MEETING WITH NGOS: The Civil Societies of Mannar is a group of NGOs that addresses various issues of concern in the community. This group met with the Living Letters Team at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church and included the Consortium for Humanitarian Agency, Freedom Refugees Rehabilitation Services, Save the Children, Volunteer Organization for Social Development, Foundation for Coexistence, Sarvodaya Relief and Peace Development, Peace Development Foundation, Jesuit Community Service, Consortium of Returnees from India, and the Population Service Center.

These NGOs are engaged in independent advocacy and in fulfilling their specific missions - on education, health, children's rights, displacement, refugee returnees from India, and human development. All of them expressed a unified concern about the worsening conditions in the Mannar region due to government violence against the Tamil people. They observed that the violence of the government that is being directed towards the suppression of "rebel" groups in Mannar has had profoundly negative affects on civilian populations. This has determined the agenda of the NGO community. The violence constrains the NGOs in doing their work.

Specifically, this group discussed the problems of the fishing community. Because of the limitations placed on fishermen on when they can go out to sea, how far they can go, and the loads they can carry, and even on the power of their boats, "the lives of people in Mannar has been devastated" one NGO representative said. The government enforced restrictions in transporting grain or fertilizers has negatively affected the work of the farmers and has led to regional food shortage. As a result food prices have also increased exponentially. The group also highlighted the problems of killings and abductions. They expressed frustration about inaccurate reports about who is doing what acts of violence and indicated that they have been able to maintain limited lines of communication with the LTTE and with paramilitary groups.

The NGOs also addressed the benefits (but also the drawbacks) of being able to contact their external stakeholders within minutes when violence erupts. Key points of this meeting included a reiteration of the need to be more independent as Sri Lankan organizations. The NGO representatives also noted the need for a change in heart to precede change towards

peace on the grassroots community level. One representative commented that there is a desire for peace, but a war mentality results from living in a war culture; this war mentality must be changed in order to achieve sustainable peace.

GOVERNMENT AGENT, MANNAR: We met with the government agent, Mr. A. Nicholas Pillai, in his office. He began his remarks by saying that he too longs for peace. Though the government claims that this is a “cleared area” – it is not. He told us that this is one of the districts that are declared a HSZ. The people of this district therefore suffer as their livelihood has been affected by the security forces. As mentioned earlier, the livelihood of fisher folk and farmers has been affected. As the Mannar District is part of the North Eastern provinces, it does not get sufficient financial support from the government for its development. He therefore depends on the NGOs - local, national and international - for the deliverance of housing, water and education to the people. Acknowledging the major role played by NGOs, Mr. Pillai said that they provide five or six times more than what the government provides. He said he is doing all in his power to normalize life for the people but is restricted by the military. Having experienced violence firsthand, Mr. Pillai expressed concern for his own safety – even as a government agent he sometimes did not feel protected by the State. He felt threatened by both the government and the rebel groups.

FISHER FOLK: On our way out of Mannar, we stopped at Joseph Vaz Nagari, which houses some 400 internally displaced families – largely fisher folk, who have moved here from army HSZs near the coast where fisher folk normally live. We were told that Bishop Rayappu Joseph, who is Bishop of this area, had given them a piece of land and had helped them build their houses. We spoke to a group of the fisher men who shared with us their struggles. They are bussed each morning leaving their homes at 5.00 am to the coast at Mannar which takes them about an hour. They then go through vigorous security checks and finally reach the sea only at 8.00 am and they have to be back from the sea by early evening. They are not allowed to fish at night time or to use engines of more than 15 horse power, because of the military’s fear that they will use the sea to link up with the LTTE. They had just one request that their freedom of movement in their own country is not hampered and that they be allowed to carry on their work so that they can improve the quality of their lives.

Kiran and Vaharai

METHODIST CHURCH, KIRAN: In Kiran we met with Rev. Satish Anthony who is superintendent over the Valachchenai Circuit and lives in Kiran, which consists of over 300 families. He explained the effects of armed conflict between armed groups and the army on his circuit. The primary concern for Rev. Anthony was the displacement of 11,000 families from this area due to the violence in 2006. Although some have returned from refugee camps, most have not because of the destruction due to the war, and secondarily due to the tsunami. Another concern was what Rev. Anthony described as a split within the LTTE that has led to the emergence of a rebel group TMVP, led by Karuna, who once was second in command in the LTTE. Karuna, who is from this region, claimed that the LTTE were more concerned with the North and did not take care of the Eastern region. Two other militant groups EPRLF and EDPD also operate in this area, though the LTTE has withdrawn to the Vanni District.

Rev. Anthony explained that the Karuna group and other rebel groups with unclear agendas and allegiances have caused major problems for the people left in his community. These militants function as vigilante mercenaries, perpetrate violence against people, illegally tax people within the community, and are responsible for many abductions and killings – with the support of the military. As a result of the violence by the State and rebel groups, people cannot get to the main roads and to work, school, or even hospitals. A final concern that Rev. Anthony raised was the ethnic composition of the area which makes the notion of a separate state impossible. Muslims compose a significant portion of the population in this region. Rev. Anthony noted that International NGOs (INGOs) had been helpful in bringing the NGO community together to work together in effective ways, but the greatest need is for the people to be able to live a “peaceful life without threat.” He also noted the need to check politicians’ desire for money and power as a way of moving towards peace. He told us that the army has a station very close to the church and periodically one can hear shelling and when the army was requested to desist from the shelling as it disturbs the elderly and the worship life of the community, an official had told them to relocate the elderly and the church!

VAHARAI: Driving through Vaharai, which had been bombed earlier this year, provided first hand experience on what it means to live in a state of war. In spite of the fact that Rev. Anthony accompanied the Living Letters Team on this drive, robed according to his office as a clergy person, the team was delayed for over an hour while Rev. Anthony was questioned about where he was going and who he was traveling with. Rev. Anthony had organized a meeting with a military official in advance however unfortunately the official had left by the time we reached. Nevertheless, the team made the following observations as we drove through the area: there were army barracks along the main road in areas that Tamil speaking communities had once occupied, a refugee camp had been squeezed between army offices and land deemed dangerous because of mines, a former LTTE graveyard had been flattened and marked as an area for a government “coconut research” project, a school, a church, a hospital, and a Hindu temple still bore the signs of bombings, houses built just about a year ago, following the tsunami were destroyed - abandoned wells marking that a vibrant and living community once inhabited the houses. Rev. Anthony also explained that there had been many civilian casualties in each of these bombings. The LTTE had not retaliated and had retreated, so all the signs of the war were the products of the aerial raids by the military.

It was with intelligence that they had got from Karuna that the military was able to attack this town, Rev. Anthony told us.

Valachchenai

VISIT TO ASHRAM FOR HUMAN SELF RELIANCE AND MEDITATION. We learnt that the centre provides “a place for individuals to deepen the power of mind with theocentric resources” as its brochure announces. These resources are not limited to any religion or culture but are available to all peoples. Against a situation of immense suffering resulting from the war as well as the tsunami disaster, this Centre challenges and empowers individuals to take responsibility and seek their own solutions in this context. According to the director of the centre, Rev. P. Anandarajah, it is mainly people who suffer who can come up with sustainable solutions to the challenges in their lives. Hence he uses meditation and other resources to empower people into self reliance. This is an important initiative as it does not depend on external resources which, the director told us, can never be sustainable.

Batticaloa

INTER-RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION FOR PEACE: This meeting was held at the house of Bishop of Trincomalee and Batticaloa, The Rt. Rev. Dr. Kingsley Swamipillai. We heard from Rev. Fr. Dominic, who chaired the meeting, said that Sri Lanka has many religions and it is not possible for people of any religion to live independent of the others. The challenge then has been for people of the different religions to accept and respect one another. They told us that the problem in Sri Lanka is one of 'Buddhist colonisation' where people of one religion seek to dominate all others. For example the people are forced to learn Sinhalese language and the names of roads and villages are being changed from Tamil to Sinhalese even in areas that are 100% Tamil. The tragedy is that the established government is part of this process of colonisation. This is clear from the fact that all military people, all district secretaries, all commissioners and all assistant commissioners are Sinhalese. The Inter-Religious Association for Peace was formed to address the inter-religious situation in Sri Lanka as well as to resettle victims of the tsunami. It has one single objective and that is to establish peace in Sri Lanka.

The situation in Batticaloa is precarious because it has been declared a HSZ and two laws have been enforced: 1) The Public Security Act, and 2) The Prevention of Terrorism Act. To enforce these laws there is heavy military presence. This military presence makes it difficult for people to live in peace. Civilians live in fear and anxiety as abductions, killings, and disappearances occur every day. The core problems are that people lack peace and have lost their identity and livelihoods.

The Inter Religious Association for Peace is concerned that the international community is silent and wonders how many abductions, killings, and disappearances must be recorded before they act. The Association has written to request for a UN Humanitarian Monitoring Mission who would be neutral, to come in and manage the situation but there has been no response. Human Rights Watch has been speaking about the atrocities in Sri Lanka, but the United Nations is not listening.

On abduction of children, the Association claims that while they condemn child abductions, it should be noted that it is not just the LTTE who are doing this. The government is also recruiting young people into the military. On their part the members of this association reported that religious leaders had spoken to the LTTE against this. Many people are sympathetic with the LTTE because the violence that the rebels commit is not as difficult to accept as the violence of economic and political structures and state sponsored violence they feel. On the way forward the association proposes withdrawal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the state of emergency after which peace lovers can seek federalism. The government should read the peoples minds and act accordingly, we were told.

Jaffna

CATHOLIC BISHOP OF JAFFNA, RT. REV. DR. THOMAS

SAVUNDRANAYAGAM: As he was to be away when we visited Jaffna, we met the Bishop of Jaffna, in Colombo on our first day in Sri Lanka. We place this record in the context of our visit to Jaffna as this was the context he spoke of this being his home, is the context he was most concerned about. The Bishop who had just returned from Kilinochi, (which is in the LTTE held Vanni region), told us about the situation of insecurity that is prevailing all over the North. Civilians are caught up in conflicts, and consequently they are often displaced as they are in constant search for safer places. Families are also victims of forced child recruitment by the rebel groups (“every family must give a child” is the principle). Once Jaffna was the centre of agricultural production but today it is going through a blockade since the closing of the A9 road on 11 August 2006 – this road was the main link to the heart of the country. Hence, it has become difficult for the people of Jaffna to have access to basic necessities such as medicine, petrol, building materials, food, etc. This has of course increased the cost of living that is reaching a worrisome stage (for instance, one kg of rice in Jaffna is three times more expensive than in Colombo). Poverty is also increasing in the peninsula due to the lack of development. On top of this, the highly fertile zones are currently HSZs, i.e. no one except the army has free access in these places. Consequently, people are fleeing away from the peninsula (now the population is about 550,000, while it was one million some 20 years ago!).

The Constitution has enshrined Buddhism as the state religion. Most of the Buddhists being of Sinhala origin, Sinhala Buddhists have in recent years asserted a pretty strong hegemony in this country where Hinduism, Christianity and Islam used to coexist peacefully with Buddhism. Christianity is the only religion which is composed of both Tamil and Sinhala faithful. Churches in Jaffna are actively working in promoting peace – they are active even as the conflict intensifies. They are present all over the peninsula, accompanying the victims of the war and Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). They also care for the communities affected by the December 2004 tsunami.

THE JAFFNA CHRISTIAN UNION: This organization brings together the Church of Ceylon (Anglican), the Salvation Army, the Methodist Church and the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India. It hosted our visit to Jaffna. In a breakfast conversation they told us that though they have different theological orientations they have come together to work for peace with justice. They have built relations with people of other faiths, the army and with the government and they do all they can together. They work with evangelical groups and churches in various ways, for example in workshops on peace with the help of the NCCSL. There are no Sinhala congregations in Jaffna. There is propaganda that the churches support the LTTE and is funding it. But, we were told, the churches in Jaffna have not taken an official position on LTTE – though individual Christians may say that LTTE is the only hope for Tamils in Sri Lanka. We have not as churches discussed what kind of political solution we need to find to resolve the present war, one of the clergymen told us.

POINT PEDRO

The visits in Point Pedro, for two members of the team, was organised by Rev. Arulnathan, from the Methodist Church. We began the visit by listening to the testimonies of families’ who had lost their loved ones in the war. Several widows, most of them very young, shared

with us the conditions in which they lost their husbands: here too they were victims of killings, abductions and disappearances. There were even cases where up to three people have been killed in the same family. Now, most of these widows live by themselves with their children and can hardly survive. Most have filed complaints to the government, NGOs, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, but their efforts have been in vain. We were told that the problems in Jaffna started when the A9 road – which links the peninsula to the rest of the country – was closed on 11 August 2006. When asked what they expected from the civil society, they all indicated the need for some one to voice their concerns and situation to the international community. They expressed their belief that if peace comes back to the country, then there is hope that the people can move forward.

Following this we had a meeting with the parish priest of the St Thomas Roman Catholic Church, Rev. Fr. Ithayaraj. He explained that fishermen were given special passes for 2-4 hours during which they can go fishing. They cannot fish beyond 500m and cannot use powered boats at all. The curfew begins at 6 pm, but it sometimes it is effected from 4 pm. Life is very difficult for the people because they do not earn much (the best time to fish is during the night, and because of the curfew they cannot do this). He also said that since families do not have the means to fend for themselves, two schools have been started by the Church to feed the children. He noticed that most of the children in the neighbourhood are starting to become violent. He also said that right after the tsunami, there was stronger solidarity between the local people and the army.

We also visited the Eriuganiman refugee camp. Most of the people living there have been forcibly displaced from places which have been turned into HSZs and where no one except the army has access, since 1990. They have also been affected by the tsunami. The Methodist Church has organised tuition classes for children going to school, sewing classes for unemployed women, and are setting up computer classes too. The teachers come from the community itself, and are all paid by the Church. Most of these IDPs are fishermen who earn very little because of all the curfew restrictions and with the closure of the A9 road, they are forced to walk 1 km to get to the sea though the sea is just 50m away! When they were displaced, the government allocated SLRs.1260 rice ration per month per family. After 18 years of displacement, they still receive the same amount (which today will feed a family for only 2 days). Hence, cases of starvation and malnutrition are increasing. The IDPs have applied to all governmental offices to increase the ration, but in vain. Hence, these people heavily rely on aid provided by the churches and NGOs.

A meeting with people from the education, business and banking sectors followed. Those from the education sector explained that most of the schools were located in HSZs – i.e. in the military compound, thus reducing considerably students' time to play and study. We were told that a few days ago there had been a bomb blast which automatically led to a three hour curfew; consequently, students who were to sit on that day for their General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level exams, (which is the university entrance exam), were unable to do so. They are now obliged to wait for another year to pass these exams and prepare to enter university. They also shared several cases where students were abducted, killed or executed under mere suspicion of involvement with the LTTE. Those from the business and banking sectors also told us how the war had negatively impacted the economy.

It is the lack of proper implementation of the law which formalised Tamil and Sinhalese as the two official languages in the country which is the problem we were told. Just a few weeks earlier, 5 youngsters and a driver who were travelling in a three-wheeler were shot to death at a checkpoint because they did not stop when the army person asked them to do so in Sinhalese. They had not understood what they were asked to do!

In terms of medical services there was only one doctor left at the main hospital. The doctors appointed by the government never last for more than a year in the peninsula because of the prevailing insecurity. Médecins Sans Frontières is helping to fill in for the increasing demand for medical care – but still much more needs to be done. Finally, they noted that it took more than two decades to reach a cease-fire agreement which has in the end never been fully accepted. Now that the situation has deteriorated, it may take another two more decades before peace is even conceivable.

The next day, at dawn, we were taken to visit the Karaveddi shelter. This IDP camp shelters more than fifty families. These were people who were caught between the fighting of the army and the LTTE. Several of them died, others were wounded. They therefore moved to this shelter which is funded by the Australian government, the International Organization for Migration and the UN High Commission for Refugees. The JCU, through the local churches, is also actively involved in providing relief to these families. These people are mainly farmers who now need to learn another job in order to survive and meet the needs of their families; in the meantime, they live mainly on daily work.

THENMARADCHCHY

Two of the team went with representatives of the Anglican Church of Ceylon and the Salvation Army to Thenmaradchchy. First, there was a meeting with one of Rev. Stephen's (Church of Ceylon) congregants, and we hear the experience of one young woman who was injured in January 2007 during the bombing of Jaffna while attending university. (The membership of his congregation has declined significantly as a result of people leaving Jaffna due to the violence.) In this meeting, the young woman described the ways in which her life has changed as a result of the violence around her. When we asked her why she thought there was violence in Jaffna she explained that she did not understand all of the reasons, but all she knows is that she and other young people desperately desire peace. Rev. Stephen too expressed the hope that the LTTE and the government would begin to engage in peace talks.

Secondly, the team members spent time with leaders of the Salvation Army in Jaffna. While this visit was going on, the team members could hear actual shells passing overhead directed by the government against the militants. The Salvation Army provides room, board, and education for nearly 40 children who are orphans or at high risk as a result of the violence that is going on in the Jaffna region. The team was shown the place where, in 2000, about 15 elders were killed by bombs while children hid in the water tank towers of the Salvation Army facilities for safety. The team members also visited a Salvation Army Church that happens to be located close to an army base. The Salvation Army has been warned both by the army and the LTTE to spend limited time in the church because of its proximity to the war zone. The vehicle in which this team traveled was stopped several times at checkpoints and because of road closings (when military vehicles pass) even before the curfew that started at dusk.

VADDUKOTTAI

Two of the team went to Vaddukottai and to the programmes run by the JDCSI (Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India). We first met with Bp. Jebanesan the former bishop as the present bishop was away. He said that speaking as a Tamil and civilian, he could not condemn the LTTE as the non-violent way to achieve justice did not work. The government has to propose a viable alternative. He critiqued the Mahavamsa philosophy of the Buddhist monks who say that their role is to “cleanse” the island.

We visited many projects of the diocese including the McCleod and Green Memorial hospitals – both of which are not working to full capacity because of the war. We saw the old people’s home run in the McCleod hospital and spoke to some of the old people living there. We visited a camp of internally displaced who live on an abandoned railway line. “If we lose with the Tigers we have lost everything,” an old woman told us. We visited a vocational training centre for children of the war and a training centre for girls (children of the fishing community). A very moving experience was the visit to a widow’s rehabilitation centre started by a woman widowed when she was 29 years old. One of the older widows, Leelavathamma, shared her story with us – her husband, her eldest son and her son-in-law had all been killed by the army. Her younger son was shot on the leg during an army shoot-out and is now unable to work. She finds strength with the other widows and makes a small earning selling food that she cooks.

JAFFNA TOWN

Two of the team was hosted by Ven S.P. Nesakumar, Archdeacon of Jaffna of the Anglican Church of Ceylon. Ven Nesakumar has continued to live in Jaffna from 1991 and has undergone the agony of living in a town under siege for the sake of his people. Jaffna town was once a flourishing township. In the nineteen seventies it was one of the very few cities in the country with all the infrastructure facilities needed for good living conditions. It flourished then with rich agricultural production and a fisheries industry and even exported these products to Colombo. One of the members of the team, who has been visiting Jaffna from 1971 on a number of occasions, was visibly outraged by the heartless destruction of such a rich and vibrant community of people. The people live there now but are engulfed in an atmosphere of melancholy, surrounded by war damaged buildings.

Ven Nesakumar took us to Christ Church Jaffna located in the main street. This church has been severely damaged by the shelling during the war. The roof and the furniture inside had been completely damaged. The walls carry the marks of bullets and shrapnel. Ven. Nesakumar related how a bomb fell near a group of people assembled in the church compound for safety but had not exploded, thus avoiding the destruction of those people. The church committee has allowed the neighbours from all faiths to erect a shrine here, to which people from all faiths come for their prayers, thanks giving and meditation. The roof of the church is repaired now. However, according to Ven Nesakumar the church is not going to be fully repaired. The marks of the war damage will be preserved for posterity to tell future generations a story of humanity’s brutality which can happen anytime when the “other” is not respected and accepted.

The Diocese has decided to convert this church into a centre for conflict analysis and resolution. It is indeed an apt place to study ways to overcome violence and stands as a

testimony to the role of the Church in the context of the Decade to Overcome Violence. We heard that even now, without any furniture, the building is used for conducting programmes every weekend on understanding conflict and in discovering ways to work for peace and reconciliation. We were amazed by the grit of these people, who have been beaten down for so long, and their courage in facing the future.

We were told that the Jaffna public library, a store house of knowledge on Tamil history, culture and civilization, was burned to the ground by paid mercenaries loyal to chauvinistic Sinhala politicians. It was rebuilt in the 1990's. However, the people of Jaffna now cannot make use of it as it has been declared a HSZ. The Duraiappah sports stadium, the main stadium for the whole of the Jaffna peninsula, is also within this HSZ and therefore is not accessible. Though the government considers that Jaffna is a "liberated area" from the LTTE since 1996, the people are still deprived of their right to livelihoods as well as to culture and recreation - all identifiable characteristics of an occupied territory.

GOVERNMENT AGENT K. GANDHI: He began by welcoming us and acknowledging that the livelihoods of the people – fishing and farming have been seriously hampered. But "we cannot achieve peace without sacrifices" he told us. The army has to keep control – "we cannot compromise national security", he said. The people want peace and all parties need to recognize this. But, we have to find the solutions in Sri Lanka – no one from outside can do this for us. He felt that the North and South have to work together – unfortunately, politicians do not seem ready to find solutions as they are following their own agenda. Unfortunately people in the South are unaware of the suffering of the people here. The government officials in Jaffna cannot do much – the army keeps the control and restricts the movement of people, for security reasons. When we asked him why NGOs had not been allowed to meet the UN Under-Secretary, during his recent visit, Mr. Gandhi said that it was the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF), which had planned the visit, in consultation with the government in Colombo. He acknowledged that people live in fear and are afraid to speak out. He also acknowledged that the 2002 ceasefire was honoured by the LTTE – demonstrating the Tamil people's commitment to peace. However, none of the agreements were honoured by the government and this led to fresh waves of violence. To him the priorities are ensuring food, education, health and power supply to the people of this region.

PEACE AND GOODWILL COUNCIL: Members of this Council told us that though Sri Lanka has been undergoing a protracted conflict since 1948 onwards, the conflict has intensified in the last three decades. With the closing of the A9 road, Jaffna is now confined to the peninsula. Life is worryingly expensive due to high shipping costs. There is also rising unemployment, commodities are scarce, there is food shortage, etc. which is adding to the burdens of the people. More than two thirds of the people live under the poverty line. Living in Jaffna is similar to living in an open prison camp, we were told. Additionally, killings, abductions and disappearances are also increasing on a daily basis.

Further some members said that political power is enjoyed by the Buddhist clergy, and most Buddhists are Sinhalese. Even the primary school's curricula teach children that Sri Lanka was given to them by Buddha, one of the members told us. There is not a single Buddhist in the Tamil community, and there is a strong belief among some Buddhists that the Tamils were sent from India to destroy their community. Students have very little opportunity to

enter the university. Going to Colombo for studies is something almost impossible. There is a lot of discrimination against Tamil students.

One of the members of the Council pointed out that several groups have visited Jaffna and other cities for the past decades, but no change has come. They wanted to know what the WCC visit will do concretely towards improving their situation. When asked as to what action he thinks the WCC should take, he said that the WCC should bring Sri Lanka back to the forefront of the international debate and advocate for the rule of law and democracy in the country. They noted that they were not encouraging a violent group (LTTE) but prefer revolutionary violence over structural violence.

With regard to the 2002 cease-fire agreement, there were several voices in favour of its restoration. Some said that there is need for the government to listen to the needs of all the people of Sri Lanka in view of effectively implementing the agreement and start working for peace. Churches and civil society are actively involved in talks with representatives from the government and the army, but little change is seen.

Colombo

NON-VIOLENT PEACE FORCE (NVPF): The representative from NVPF, Marcel Smit, explained that this NGO is part of a network of 95 organisations around the world working on non-violence and peace. They started it in 2003 with the idea to reach the grass-root level in peace making efforts. The NVPF staff lives and work among the people in the most volatile areas. In order to create trust and build confidence among the people, the staff stays even when the crisis intensifies. The aim is to help people who want to be active but do not know how by bringing them out from their isolation. Smit explained that this is what the NVPF refers to as protective presence, and in some cases proactive presence. The organisation tries to build relationships with the armed factions and the police, and also works with all communities (Tamils, Muslims, Sinhalese) in view of building bridges wherever possible. He indicated that there have been cases of harassment and intimidation of the NVPF staff but this is a risk the staff is willing to take, and NVPF continues to be intensively engaged although with a low profile. Space is shrinking for NGOs and civil society in general in Sri Lanka. This also creates a feeling of frustration and helplessness among humanitarian aid workers.

NVPF has 4 offices in Sri Lanka: Colombo, Batticaloa, Jaffna and Trincomalee. The NVPF tries to bring together families whose members have been abducted, and helps them to file complaints with the police. NVPF tries to reach all actors of the conflict, although it is difficult with the LTTE because they don't have any direct access. In Trincomalee, NVPF has established Peace Committees who focus on community problems and tries to build bridges among them. In Jaffna, NVPF tries to protect local human rights defenders while they are carrying out their work.

According to Smit, in the end the Sri Lankans have to make their own peace. The cease-fire agreement didn't start a peace process. There have been some success stories but violence broke out and things deteriorated. There are also groups who benefit from the war. Several NGOs have tried to help during the crisis, especially by focusing on the issue of accountability. The key intervention that NGOs can bring now is to show their support to the people and also raise awareness. With regard to the "Responsibility to Protect" concept (R2P), Marcel Smit noted that this has not been fully used so far. Asked whether the idea of having a peace-keeping force is realistic, he said it is not, because India will oppose it. It is more realistic to have human rights monitoring groups established in the country, he said.

On economic violence, he pointed out that the people are vulnerable to the existing structural violence and as it happens in all situations of war the entire war is fought on the back of innocents. For example, in most war situations, when violence breaks out, most NGOs and International Organisations leave, thus the local people are left without protection. When asked if it was possible to be apolitical but still be engaged, he explained that it was rather difficult to do so, although it is possible to talk about a situation without pointing fingers or dictating to people what should be done.

THE CIVIL MONITORING COMMITTEE ON EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS AND DISAPPEARANCES: We met with Mr. Sirithunga Jayasuriya the chairman of this committee. He said that since September 2006 there has been an increase in abductions largely of the Tamil business community in Colombo. However, his committee is convinced

that the number of cases has gone down since they have begun this monitoring role – but it has not stopped. They still have 139 pending cases. Their committee collects evidence of the killings and discusses this with the Inspector General of Police and other officers and brings it to the attention of the President. In cases where there have been arrests, the committee is not sure that the people arrested are the real criminals behind the abductions. They also keep the UN Human Rights Commission informed. He told us that the abductions are with the knowledge of the government and are politically motivated, because Tamil businessmen are suspected to be in support of the LTTE – they are abducted and a ransom is collected. Some are killed. Colombo is so heavily under security, it is strange that people could be so easily abducted. The Red Cross workers were abducted in front of the main railway station! He believes that the international community can play a role as the government is dependent on international support so economic pressure can be brought on it.

He said that “NGOs are being branded and harassed – we monitor this too.” When in the 88-89 uprising it was the Sinhalese who were targeted, the government allowed NGOs to act – but now when it is the Tamils, one does not see the same level of acceptance. The media too is completely controlled. Every now and then the government gives the impression that it is ready for peace talks, or that it has a plan for resolving the conflict – but this is a smokescreen. There is much work to be done, he concluded.

ARCHBISHOP OF COLOMBO, MOST REV. DR. OSWALD GOMIS: We met with the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Colombo at his residence. He spoke of the endemic violence all over the world and of the growth of fundamentalism in all religions which provokes violence. He said that it is wrong to describe the context in Sri Lanka as “ethnic” - its roots lie in religion, though it did originate as an ethnic problem with the denial of the rights of one group. There have been several legal rectifications – for example in the recognition of Tamil as an official language – but it is true that many other matters have not been rectified, and anyway, legal corrections are not enough. But both sides are against negotiated settlement – the LTTE is a military organization not a popular movement – not all Tamil people are supportive of it. The LTTE has been at the back of the abduction of children and forced conscription, he said. He then turned to the team and asked, “What did you as the international community do when a church was bombed in Mannar and a MP was killed in Batticloa?” He felt it is inevitable that the government uses force and military power to put down the LTTE.

He felt that it is up to the leaders in the South to offer the solution for a negotiated settlement. Every community must be respected and there should be a genuine sharing of power. He was against the use of federalism as the way for the settlement of the political situation, as it is a “bad word” here – some sections of the government are against it and therefore it is better not to use it. He felt that what is needed is a change of heart as Sri Lanka is in the grip of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism.

The Archbishop said: “The Catholic Bishops Conference of SL has repeatedly spoken out against all violence – whoever perpetrates it and we have appealed for a negotiated settlement. We are part of the Congress of Religions which includes all faiths and we have organised mass protests. As a Christian minority we are so easily misunderstood and face threats. What we want is peaceful co-existence as each individual is sacred”, he said. He

appealed to the WCC to take a careful and balanced as well as impartial approach in its statements.

COMMITTEE FOR INVESTIGATION OF DISAPPEARANCES (CID): We heard from Dr. Vickramabahu Karunaratne, the President of this unregistered NGO which investigates disappearances related to war in various parts of the country. CID was launched in September 2006 though disappearances are not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. Some members of CID had launched an earlier campaign against disappearances in the 1988/90 period.

CID collects data on these disappearances and investigates them regardless of the religion or nationality of the people who have disappeared. They usually send this information to the Inspector General of Police as well as to the UN Human Rights Commission, to the UN Working Group on Disappearances and to the Amnesty International. Their records show that most of the people who have disappeared are Tamil speaking youth. The disappearances are often as a result of abductions and killings but some Tamil business people, especially in Colombo, are abducted for a ransom. Others are abducted and killed because they take and express certain political positions on the situation in Sri Lanka.

Mr. Karunaratne told us that they deduce that the government may be behind some of these abductions because some of the people have been abducted in HSZs and the abductors somehow escape police checks. Usually the CID organizes the family members of the disappeared and advises them on the procedures to take in reporting the incidents. They also encourage family members to participate in agitations against the disappearances – CID has organised protest demonstrations sometimes drawing together as many as a thousand people. As women suffer most because of disappearances, CID has provided a forum for women to help them cope with the threats and the fear which sometimes stops them from reporting disappearances.

Besides this, the CID organizes press conferences to create awareness about disappearances as well as lobby for action from various international bodies. For example on 25th October 2006, they wrote letters to the Ambassadors of US, Japan, Indian, European Union, and Norway appealing to them to raise the issue of disappearances with the Sri Lankan government. Only the US Government responded to this. The CID thinks that there is need for the international community to pressurize on Sri Lankan government to stop all forms of state repression especially against the Tamil people and all abuses of human rights especially abductions and killings so that peace can be realized in the country.

INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT AGAINST ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM (IMADR): The Living Letters Team heard from Nimalka Fernando about the advocacy work that IMADR is doing in order to protect the human rights of the Sri Lankan people. This organization works in conjunction with other NGOs and INGOs in Sri Lanka to organize and raise awareness inside and outside the country. She told us that recently, this organization had partnered with others in a fact-finding visit to Batticaloa and they would be going to Madhu for the ten day festival at St. Mary's Church on the invitation of the Catholic Bishop of Mannar, Bp. Rayappu Joseph. He had requested some of them to be there to help monitor the situation.

IMADR and its partners had tried to increase the visibility of the human rights violations in Sri Lanka during the visit of the UN Under Secretary General on Humanitarian Affairs in early August, 2007 – but they had not been successful in meeting him face to face – they had registered a formal protest with him. This meeting with IMADR provided us with a different perspective on the NGO presence in Sri Lanka: we were exposed to people who are doing direct lobbying work and who are involved directly in national electoral politics. It showed us how some NGOs have had to put their specific agendas on hold in order to directly address the paralyzing violence that is raging in the country.

ACTION FRONT AGAINST VIOLENCE: The meeting was with a journalist, Ajith Herath, who shared with us the situation of Sinhala people who do not support the politics of the government. He was working for the Sinhala newspaper, Hiru, which was shut down by the state, along with similar papers because of their editorial policy. He said that any Sinhala who opposes the regime is targeted by the government as a “Peace Tiger” or “Sinhala Tiger”. Some journalists have been killed, and others have managed to escape the country but still remain active from abroad.

He explained that he had been an activist with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front or JVP) in 1989 as it had started as a much needed Left force and was at that time supporting the human rights of victims of state repression in the uprising in the South. In 1994, the JVP joined the Parliament and turned out to be a chauvinistic party with a view to win votes and in 1995, the JVP openly supported the government against the Tamils. This is when a conflict of ideologies came between the JVP and several newspapers. The political agenda of the nationalistic groups is built on the “otherisation” of the Tamil people. When local newspapers published pictures of a church in Jaffna bombed by the government forces and of 10 children killed during this aerial attack, the JVP accused the newspapers of being anti-war. According to Herath in the late 1990s, the newspapers started to question how a murderous army can become a patriotic army simply because they are massacring Tamils in the North. Consequently, the JVP instructed the government to close down several newspapers. Ironically, the current emergency regulations that are being used to repress Tamils were taken from measures used by the State against the JVP before 1994, he said!

The JVP is demonising the Tamil people. To instil fear in people's mind, they spread rumours that the Tamils will come to Colombo with arms and will wage war. Journalists of the mainline government media publish pictures of Sinhala people who safeguard the lives of Tamils. This is in clear contrast to the 1990s when the Sinhala people were shown as cruel to the Tamils. Several Sinhala journalists have been arrested because they stood up for the rights of Tamils, and their image has been associated with the LTTE as if they were trained and received arms from the LTTE. Because of the numerous cases of arrests and killings, trade unions have been crippled in Sri Lanka - the few that are left support the government. The government has made use of the war to do anything they want; consequently, anyone who is against the government is suppressed or silenced. Anyone who works on violence related issues receives threats on his/her own life and is under suspicion.

INFORM: This is an organization that was set up in 1989 by Sunila Abeyasekara, as a documentation and research centre. The main issues they work on are: Firstly, the attitude

of the government who for example had engaged in aerial bombings of the Tamil held areas and had caused massive displacement of civilian populations and then are unwilling to deal with the consequences of this. People have been displaced several times. Another example was when Tamil populations in Colombo were forcibly bussed out of their homes and moved to Vavuniya to refugee camps there. When there were protests from human rights groups, the Tamil people were brought back to their homes! There is no consistency in government's policies.

Secondly, INFORM is concerned about the plight of civilians in the North and East. They have limited access to electricity, petrol and food and have to endure rigorous and repeated security checks. The 2002 ceasefire had brought some level of normalcy, though women who returned after being forcibly abducted by liberation groups were not easily accepted back into their communities.

INFORM's third concern is with violence against women. Rape, harassment at check points and domestic violence go un-reported as women fear intimidation if they pursue a complaint. A new phenomenon in the North and East are under age marriages – as opportunities for education are unavailable, parents want to “get rid” of the girls, as they find it difficult to keep them in safety.

INFORM works with other human rights groups and is trying to bring the issue to the UN Human Rights Committee in September 2007. R2P is an important concept for Sri Lanka, but the government will view it as military intervention by external forces. The government does not want to be branded as a failed state and will ensure that other Third World countries support its bid to oppose any indictment by international agencies. There is real fear that military rule and an even more authoritarian form of government will be imposed soon, she said.

WORKSHOP AT THE NATIONAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL SL ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING: We were privileged to be able to participate in a part of the Annual General Meeting of the NCCSL and to share our experiences through a workshop with the 100 or so representatives of the member churches and ecumenical organizations which form the NCCSL. After Aruna Gnanadason introduced the purpose of the visit and the team, two members of the team shared their experiences. Eunice Kamaara said: “Since we arrived, we have travelled to various parts of your country. We wish to make a brief report of what we saw with our eyes, felt in our hearts and thought with our minds as we shared, in a very small way, an experience of what comprises your day to day life. It is difficult for us to express our experiences but we must say that it was extremely painful and sad to see and feel how violence has devastated your very beautiful country. Indeed we can not claim to understand your experience but be assured that we share in your difficulties and frustrations. One of the things that struck us most is the enormous work done by the churches in Sri Lanka, though a very small minority. You are helping your people cope with series of broken dreams even in very hostile situations. In an otherwise hopeless situation, we saw and felt the presence of the Church as a beacon of hope.”

After this, Jennifer Leath shared some of the major findings of the team – the challenges to the unity of the churches in an ethnically divided country; the different approaches to dealing with the conflict; the economic devastation we saw; and the great gulf between the North

and East and the South. She shared what one of the pastors in Jaffna had said, to describe the different opinions: “We prefer revolutionary violence to structural violence”. Thereafter, Semegnish Asfaw shared the experiences of Ethiopians during the communist rule in her country to show that the people of Sri Lanka are not alone in their struggles.

In groups the AGM wrote some of the elements that they think a Declaration on Just Peace ought to include.

THE COMMITTEE FOR INVESTIGATION OF DISAPPEARANCES: At a second meeting with this Civil Monitoring Group, we met with Mr. Mano Ganesan, a dynamic Tamil Member of Parliament (MP) in his small office. The MP observed that the government of Sri Lanka is party to the Human Rights Conventions and yet it does not act seriously enough on the abductions and disappearances of civilians. He observed that different people have different understandings of the military struggle in the country and therefore while some call it liberation; others call it terrorism and yet others call it a rebel movement. In his understanding both races of people have a claim in the history of the country. The attempt is to make it a Sinhala-Buddhist republic – excluding all others, even Sinhala Christians, he said. The present constitution of the country does not reflect the aspirations of all people, in his understanding and the present government cannot bring peace and have thus created Tamil extremism and a movement for separation, he believes. According to him, while the government has the responsibility for national security, it also has a responsibility for the security of the Tamils. He argued that while no country should interfere in the internal affairs of another country, normally; the international community has to intervene when the situation is bad – he therefore believes that “The responsibility to protect” is a good institution. Sri Lanka needs a human rights monitoring instrument. He also underlined that Christianity has a reconciling role to play because it has in it both Tamil and Sinhala populations. “I have a Sri Lankan dream of a country where all our people can live together in equality – this is the first step to peace,” he concluded.

MOST VEN BELLANWILA WIMALARATHANA – Through this meeting with one of the premier Buddhist leaders in the country, Most Ven Bellanwila Wimalarathana, the Living Letters Team heard a Buddhist perspective on the violence that is taking place in Sri Lanka. This meeting, which Most Ven Bellanwila Wimalarathana hospitably hosted at his temple, on the first day of ritual celebrations, began with a description of the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. He described the Sinhalese and Tamil identities in relation to the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Most Ven Bellanwila Wimalarathana described the early presence of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the conflicting affects of Indian and Western influence on the Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka. However, he was very critical of the involvement of Buddhist monks in politics.

Although he did not seem fully aware of the violence and its affects in the northern and eastern regions of the country, Most Ven Bellanwila Wimalarathana did call for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing violence. While he acknowledged that it is the Tamil people who face the most violence, he explained the ways in which all Sri Lankans are negatively impacted by the violence that is raging. Although he urged “terrorist” groups to stop their violent campaigns and suggested that the government should be willing to make some compromises, he was unable to identify any points on which the government might be able

to compromise. He was also unable to identify any specific concerns of the Tamil people for which he would be willing to advocate personally.

JATHIKA HELA URUMAYA (JHU): We met with 8 of the Central Committee members of the JHU at their headquarters. The group included three Buddhist monks. The main spokespersons were Naredra Gunathilaka, a lawyer and Nirmala Perera who is a Senior Lecturer of Law at the University of Colombo. They told us that the party was based on Buddhist principles and is just three years old. It was formed 14 days before the 2004 elections and yet it won 5% of the seats in parliament and they expect to keep improving this position. It all began when Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera, a Buddhist monk was allegedly murdered in Russia. The Buddhists felt insecure, because their rights were being eroded ever since 1999 from the time when there has been political instability. The JHU was formed as the Sinhalese National Heritage Party – all its candidates being monks. It emerged out of dissatisfaction with lay leadership and a feeling that Sri Lanka needs a party headed by monks. The election commitments made included the determination to investigate the death of the monk; the promotion of a unitary state; and to bring legislation to control alcoholism. This report includes some of the comments they made, not verbatim, but in the first person as it depicts the sentiments of the JHU and of those who spoke to us.

“By gaining political power, we will compel the government to follow Buddhist principles. We have to ensure that the rights of Buddhists are not eroded,” one of them told us. He continued that, historically, this country is 10,000 years old, and we have evidence of a great Buddhist civilization in Anuradhapura which is 2,500 years old. Later in history, Tamil kings ruled for short period – but all of them ruled with Buddhist principles. Most Tamils are Hindus and the Buddhists have close connections with them. But, then came the European colonizers and now the INGOs have come and have initiated conversions.

JHU is committed to bring under control the INGOs – who are in fact American and South Korean backed Christian fundamentalists - as they are attacking the cultural roots of Sri Lanka. The JHU believes that they are using monetary incentives to convert the Buddhists. INGOs follow many unethical practices in rural parts of the country – through projects such as Montessori schools and empowerment of women they have a hidden agenda to convert. They spread hatred and instigation against the Buddhists, breaking Buddhist statues, and stealing statues from temples for commercial purposes, they told us. World Vision, they claimed has been distributing biscuits in the shape of Buddha – they showed us pictures of this. Churches have been built on sacred Buddhist sites. The JHU has no problem with the established churches and they have good cooperative relations with them. Their problem is with the fundamentalist Christians who claim that they will make Sri Lanka into a Christian country. These INGOs have been funding the LTTE, they said.

The theological foundation of JHU is the concept of Dharmaraja, based on the principles of Panchasheela. Buddhism believes strongly in the protection of minority rights. (as an example, Gunathilaka said that his company has 7 Tamils and 1 Jehovah’s witness in its employ).

JHU believes that it is a myth that there is an ethnic problem in Sri Lanka; “our problem is the terrorist movement” we were told. The claim that it is an ethnic problem is based on a

myth that there was a Tamil State. “We are willing to accept this theory, if we are given proof, not because we have a gun held against our head” he said as he continued to speak of the violation of human rights by the terrorists. But, “we have to use violence to defeat violence”, one of them said. The majority of people believe that the terrorists must be defeated, she concluded. VHU believes that peace cannot be achieved at gun point, we were told.

Gunathilaka defended the use of military force by the government, as it has to be responsible for national security. He continued that the government has been successful – they have stopped terrorist attacks in Colombo. “We have liberated the Eastern province and have proved that we can do it anywhere, we are firm on the commitment to liberate the North too. We believe the terrorists must be defeated and fully support the US government’s anti-terrorism stand – we wrote to President Bush congratulating him. We believe in peace not in “pieces” of our country,” were some of the sentiments we heard.

They believe that no negotiation is possible with the LTTE who are not ready for dialogue and negotiation is not possible with them. LTTE does not represent the Tamil race. EPRLF and PLOTE, which were formerly militant groups, agree with us. The LTTE is in fact a mafia group. We consider them to be IRCs or Island (Recidivist) Criminals. Most Tamils are afraid to speak out against them, they told us.

“The Sinhalese and Buddhists deserve more than this. We have no problems with the Tamils, but this country belongs to the Sinhala civilization – we are ready to give Tamils equal rights in our country,” they concluded.

MINISTER OF CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION, HON. DEW GUNASEKHARA: He spoke of the 50 year old ethnic question which has turned into a war in which both sides have lost life. In his estimation it is the politicians who are the main obstacles as ordinary people are not chauvinistic. He felt that a small group of upper class gentry are manipulating the political processes. He continued to tell us that the British colonizers had followed a divide and rule policy but there was then a clear two language formula for education and administration. Economic fragility gave birth to the Sinhala only policy. It called for a “reasonable use of Tamil” but this was never implemented, he regretted. With the 1983 war that 400,000 Tamils left the country. It was only in 1987 that Tamil was made an official language. LTTE is not willing to give up the call for Ealam – a separate state. But this is no longer viable because 53% of Tamils live outside the North and East. 90% of the people want peace – but today there are new factors confounding the problem, it is the JVP and the JHU. We are trying to work with them. The government is preparing to propose a solution. “I don’t think the government wants a military solution,” he added.

MINISTER FOR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, CHAIR PERSON OF THE ALL-PARTY REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE, PROF. TISSA VITHARANA: Prof Tissa Vitharana told us that the President of Sri Lanka has formed an All Party Conference with the mandate to produce a proposal to reach a settlement. He said that the President will use the proposal to negotiate with the LTTE. He agreed that the Tamil

people have genuine grievances, but the LTTE is a militant and terrorist organization which is not ready for serious talks as they still have a separatist agenda.

Due to the history of the county, the majority Sinhalese population has a minority complex. They have fears that the Tamils of India will take over the country. What is needed is devolution of power or power sharing so as to provide what the Tamils need. At the same time efforts must be made to assure the Sinhala population that this is not a first step towards separation. The document which contains the proposal has been accepted by the other Tamil groupings (EPRLF, PLOTE, TULF, and EPDP – all formerly militant groups). His committee was working for a solution that will enable the Sinhala and Tamils to live together in one country with shared power. The churches have been very supportive of the process as have been the Buddhist and Hindu priests. He told us of the need to find a solution by which the government will not fall. The JHU is also participating in the process – though they do not agree with it. He said that it is important to keep the JHU in the dialogue, if not, they will step out of the process and join with the JVP and this will have serious consequences for the process, he concluded.

UN OFFICIAL, MS AMBIKA SATKUMANATHAN: This was the last of the meetings we had. She is an official of the UN Human Rights Commission but as the UN is unable to establish an office on human rights here, she works under cover of the International Development Law Organisation. She observed that after the current government came to power, international NGOs started facing criticism. Regrettably, the corruption around the tsunami funds gave the needed excuse for the government to target NGOs. The government formed a Parliamentary Select Committee to monitor NGOs and some have been summoned by this committee for questioning. In conflict areas, the NGOs are seen as the only saviour as the government does not provide adequate resources. However, it is true that the INGOs do not know the local situation or have an adequate analysis and often unwittingly get involved. Commenting on the circumstances around the visit of Holmes, the UN Under-Secretary, she acknowledged that mistakes had been made and care will be taken by this office to ensure that the same mistakes are not made when Ms Louise Arbour, the Human Rights Commissioner will come in October. She said that she is committed to ensure that the NGOs get an opportunity to meet her.

According to her, what is needed are international human rights monitors in the frame of the R2P regimen and the setting up of a human rights office of the UN. She noted that the government does not agree with this and therefore it is difficult to enforce it. Even the UK and German Ambassadors have been silenced by the government.

Ms Satkumanathan reported that the UNHCR and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) are functioning in LTTE areas. The Tamil Relief Organisation (TRO) is a front for the LTTE in support of its relief work and it has been taking care of the needs of the people as much as it is able. But, she said that it is true that there are human rights violations in the LTTE areas too, For example, each family is expected to provide one soldier to the LTTE or in lieu of this to pay an amount as penalty. She added that it is almost impossible for Tamils to leave the LTTE areas and there is also the concern about child soldiers. Many people live in real poverty in the Tamil held regions as the government has closed all contacts, she said. She acknowledged that worse atrocities are conducted by the Karuna group. In the absence of an established UN Office, her office acts as a conduit between Sri

Lanka and UN instruments. The human rights situation in Colombo too is really bad and unfortunately, people are getting immune to the violence and do not react anymore even if five people are killed at a time, she said.

DOV Themes in the context of Sri Lanka:

The Living Letters Team reflected on what this context has to contribute to the DOV themes – concluded that in the context of violence, a vibrant Church which works with incredible commitment for peace and reconciliation needs to address the following issues:

1. Peace begins at home:

A. Violence and the unity of the churches: While many of the church leaders in each of the regions we visited in the North and East of Sri Lanka are working together across denominational lines, there are significant concerns about the depth and stability of this unity. Additionally, there is clear agreement amongst the church leaders about the need for peace, but there is no unity on how peace is to be achieved.

Furthermore, the unity between the churches is limited; some are concerned that once peace is established within the country, the unity that has evolved in order to achieve this civil peace will dissolve and expose deep denominational differences. In addition there are regional differences within the churches. Whereas many church leaders in the North and East are fighting for Tamil rights, this is not necessarily true of church leaders in the South. Even within denominations there are differences between leaders in the North and South. Church leaders have not reached any agreement about their support for the government or the LTTE. While the Roman Catholic Church and the evangelical churches have not yet reached any agreement about whether or not a separatist or a federalist approach is best, the NCCSL constituent churches and other ecumenical bodies submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs and National Integration, supporting a secular, federal constitution, in August, 2006. There is also unity of opinion among the churches that they will need to work together to mobilize religious leaders of other faiths. Additionally, caste issues do divide the churches – this was referred to particularly when we were in Jaffna.

B. Violence against women and children: As in every war and conflict situation, Sri Lankan women have experienced rape, detainment, harassment at checkpoints and other violations of their personal security in the two decades of civil war. Incidents of violence against women have been on the rise over the past few years throughout the country. According to UNIFEM (the UN Development Fund for Women) there are an estimated 40,000 war widows in Sri Lanka. There are approximately 30,000 female-headed families in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Widows of army and police personnel add to the vulnerability of female life in the country. Added to this, is the concern about child soldiers who are recruited by the liberation movements such as the LTTE. Forced conscription of children is an issue of concern for the churches as it perpetuates a culture of violence with lasting effects on future generations.

C. Nexus between Buddhism and Sinhala: There is need for the churches to strengthen the good and courageous work they have begun to get into dialogue with the

Buddhist monks. The strong sentiments that we heard from representatives of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), made us realise just how complex and difficult solutions are going to be for peace in the country. The Sinhala only policy has been slightly diffused in recent times with claims that all government officials and army personnel have to learn Tamil. However, a Tamil church leader said, “This is good policy, no doubt, but why not employ more Tamils into the military, the police and the government instead?” The Constitution needs amendment to make it more inclusive of the rights of Tamils and of minority religious groups, but what makes it worrying is that the JHU is pushing for its own Constitutional changes to establish the primary place both for the Buddhist religion and for the Sinhala language. The churches in Sri Lanka need the solidarity of the world church in this.

2. Peace in the market place:

“We prefer revolutionary violence to structural violence” a clergyman in Batticaloa told us. Throughout the visit, the team came to appreciate a distinct difference between these forms of violence. The fact that this war has all but destroyed the livelihoods of the people – both fisher folk and the farming community, are forms of economic and structural violence. Blockades, intentional deprivation of the tsunami benefits, keeping development aid and other benefits from the people, closure of roads and railway routes – all point to this form of violence. The priest described revolutionary violence, as violence which seeks to overturn systems of oppression and suffering versus violence which confirms and solidifies systems that oppress. Importantly, both revolutionary and structural violence in Sri Lanka have taken both physical and extra-physical forms. Although the Living Letters Team looked for signs of hope and efforts towards peaceful resolution of all violence, it became clear that not all violence could be categorized in the same way. It continues to be a challenge for the people of Sri Lanka to identify and oppose all forms of violence that oppress them and strip them of their rights and dignity.

3. Peace on earth and peace with the earth:

While there is so much analysis and reports on the military and social consequences of the armed conflict little is spoken of or written about the impact of the present violence on the earth. Media blockades and press censorship ensure that the extent of destruction is not known to the wider community nor is it reported. There is a claim that researchers, environmental organisations and advocacy movements in Sri Lanka, while working and campaigning on problems and issues pertaining to the South, appear to have been either ignorant or silent on the ecological consequences of the war. Some Tamil scholars have recognised the interdependent and indivisible links that exist between the two groups of rights, the human rights to life, liberty and health and the rights to a clean, healthy and safe environment. The most distinctive feature of the Jaffna Peninsula, and many other parts of Ealam, is the Palmyrah palm, which grew in extensive groves all over the peninsula, totally dominating its landscape are now decreasing.

The effects of the environmental crisis are most felt in the forested areas of the Tamil homeland. In addition, there has been extensive disruption to the environment and to the fragile ecological balance prevailing in the non-forested and urban areas. The major

factors causing destruction of the environment in the post 1983 period are the use of heavy explosives, military manoeuvres, aerial bombings and the displacement of people. The use of explosives, carpet bombing and aerial shelling has caused extensive damage to the bio diversity and the physical environment. The displacement of people has meant that both agricultural lands and urban areas have been left unattended. Another effect of bombardment has been the destruction of wells in the peninsula – as we drove through the region we saw thousands of wells left standing unattended – with the houses destroyed. The most devastating effect of displacement on the environment has been caused by the lack of fuel and building materials. The need for firewood and the construction of temporary shelter for the vast refugee population has been an additional factor resulting in deforestation.

Other parts of the Eastern province too have economic embargoes imposed on them at present. The effects in these areas have again been deforestation and clearing of mangroves mainly for use as firewood. From the mid 1980s, the environmental consciousness of the armed resistance movements, especially the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE), has been high. This has led to the movement taking several steps that have helped in arresting the deterioration of the environment. It is only the resolution of the conflict would therefore lead to a healthier, safer and more sustainable environment in which the aspirations of the two peoples living on the island could be attained in peace.

4. Peace in the streets:

At a mission project for children of the war that the team passed by on one of its regional visits, two children held toy guns that they built with plastic blocks – holding it, as they would have seen soldiers do. Although children throughout the world “play with guns,” this was a simple reminder of the profound and permeating affects of violence at every level of the Sri Lankan culture and experience. In Batticaloa, we were told that till recently young men (almost children) belonging to the Karuna faction, paraded the streets carrying guns, threatening civilian populations. Given the long history of violence within Sri Lanka there is at least one full generation that has not known life without civil war. A culture of violence has developed within the psyche of all Sri Lankans: security checkpoints, abductions, unreliable resources, and insecure health, education, and labor opportunities have become normalized. These experiences have come to define life in Sri Lanka. As a result establishing peace within Sri Lanka must go beyond ending the physical violence between the agents of warfare in the country. As various leaders of NGOs and religious leaders pointed out, it is necessary that the hearts and minds of all Sri Lankans be changed. There is a need for the entire country to be reoriented towards peace.

5. Make peace not war.

An action plan for peace: The huge gulf in perception and even experience between the North and East and the South hit us as we traveled to these more conflict ridden, predominantly Tamil areas as well as in Colombo. While Colombo does experience all the effects of the war – it is the North and East that experiences the worst effects. We saw the need for peacemaking through dialogue with mutual respect so as to focus on

political negotiations for sustainable peace; cooperation on humanitarian concerns and better communication between Colombo and the conflict areas. We saw the need for the Sri Lankan government to take more efforts to protect the minority Tamil population and protect the right to life, to survival and free movement; and security of the people at the grassroots. Both sides will need to commit to stop the killing, abductions and forced conscription of people, particularly the young. There is need to care for refugees and the internally displaced as well as to ensure that the people get access to basic needs including food, clean water and medicine. We strongly believe that every effort should be made to restart the peace talks and pursue the search for the truth and reconciliation.

The international community needs to reconsider how it can mediate and re-negotiate with all parties to re-enter the peace talks. Additionally, there is need for continuous humanitarian aid to be provided with efficiency and transparency. It is crucial that the final solutions are found from within Sri Lanka. However, the R2P obligations to Sri Lanka need to be honoured by the international community – through instruments such as human rights monitors. The churches all over the world need to keep Sri Lanka on the ecumenical agenda and to influence governments that could continue to play a peace-brokering role. There is need for fresh thinking on Sri Lanka. The role of the Indian government was reiterated again and again. The need to control the arms trade in the region and particularly the movement of illegal arms was emphasized.

The efforts to bring a resolution to the Human Rights Committee on the Sri Lankan context, was emphasized by many we spoke to. There are three steps in the action plan for peace: to stop all forms of violence and guaranteeing basic rights; to re-open peace talks and then to ensure a sustainable peaceful regime. Working for a form of federalism and power sharing as a solution was often spoken of – though even this is far from easy. There is little possibility of a separate Tamil Ealam, given the fact that now the Tamils are scattered all over the island, given the displacement caused by the war, and the programme of “Sinhala colonization”, as an intentional policy by the government.

CONCLUSION: We came away from Sri Lanka with mixed feelings – we were overwhelmed by the beauty of this island nation; inspired by the commitments of the churches and of human rights activists to work for peace and reconciliation and to be a voice of courage in a very difficult context; saddened by the many signs of suffering and violence we saw around us; and disheartened by the lack of political will to find real solutions to the 25 year old war. From the leaders of the churches we heard voices of hope that the churches will continue to play a prophetic role, working with peoples of other faiths, including the Buddhist community, for peace and reconciliation.

Rt. Rev. Duleep de Chikera, Bishop of Colombo, (Church of Ceylon) for example, said that Sri Lanka has three options: change of heart; a democratic process; or a peaceful uprising by the people by a gradual strengthening of civil society. He opined that the third option may be the most effective. The Congress of Religions, of which the Church is a member, came to the conclusion that it is necessary to organize peaceful marches led by religious leaders but unfortunately the government influenced by the chauvinist Buddhist forces and stopped this. There are many progressive Buddhists and leaders who want to bring change. The Church is called to be leaven in this context and work

closely with Buddhist groups. But, he acknowledged the mistakes the Church has made through history beginning with mission history, which dictates that the Church has to speak and act with humility now.

Bp. de Chikera also said that it is necessary for the international NGOs to review their role and check whether they have played the kind of role they ought to, as they have made many mistakes. He also hoped that the WCC member churches will take it on themselves to engage expatriate Tamils in dialogue for peace.

Please call on the churches all over the world to pray for us, was a message the Living Letters Team heard over and over again – not just from representatives of the churches, but from ordinary men and women we met in the North, East and South. The Decade to Overcome Violence can be a sign of hope for the churches and peoples of Sri Lanka. It goes without saying that this beautiful island does not deserve this long term war and these wounds to its soul.

The Living Letters Team to Sri Lanka makes the following recommendations to the churches all over the world:

- **Bring Sri Lanka back to the forefront of the international efforts for peace making.**
- **Empower the churches and affirm their role in building relations with other faith groups and in working for peace and reconciliation.**
- **Help strengthen the efforts for inter-religious dialogue on peace. A specific proposal made was that the WCC help facilitate a dialogue between the Sri Lankan Buddhist priests and Buddhist priests from other Asian countries.**
- **Identify for the people safe ways for the victims to voice out their experiences of violence – for example by facilitating their voices in the Human Rights Commission and other international fora.**
- **Call on the international NGOs to continue to support the humanitarian situation, but to ensure that they work with the churches in the country, with the NCCSL, and their related organizations and with local NGOs in seeking long term solutions.**
- **Bring pressure on the Sri Lankan government to restore the still relevant elements of the 2002 peace agreement and ensure their implementation; as well as put pressure on the government to re-invest and restart the peace talks.**
- **Learn from the Sri Lankan context so as to strengthen the themes of the DOV and in the content of the Declaration on Just Peace.**
- **Pray for the churches and people of Sri Lanka.**