

THE UNSUNG HEROES

There are members of the Security Forces and the Police who dare to venture beyond the call of duty in the performance of national and humanitarian services. While they too are heroes of our nation, who should be recognized and rewarded, they are either killed while performing such services or are victimized for performing such services that may be argued to be beyond the scope of their responsibility. These are the unsung heroes whose actions often go unnoticed by the general public, because they receive little or no publicity. In paying tribute to all such heroes, let me focus attention on three of their kind, to illustrate their plight.

The tsunami of 26th December 2004 brought unprecedented death and destruction to our country. The Pottuvil Divisional Secretariat Area was very badly affected, with Arugambay that is considered to be one of the best tourist resorts in this island being completely cut off from Pottuvil, after the tidal wave washed off the connecting bridge. Life virtually came to a stand still. The tourist who survived had to be immediately evacuated and the villagers who survived amidst all the death and destruction had to be provided with food and shelter sans any delay. I visited this area on or about the 31st of December 2004 and the survivors, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims were full of praise for the humanitarian services performed by the Police Special Task Force, which was beyond the call of duty. The stranded foreign and local tourists were evacuated as soon as possible and relief was organized for the local population with the resources available, with much responsibility and dedication, by Chief Inspector S.N.Gunaratne, the Officer Commanding the Srastrawela STF camp.

During my visit I saw with my own eyes the arrangements this Chief Inspector had initiated to provide food and shelter to the affected population, who were predominantly Muslim. Among the STF personnel working under this Chief Inspector was sergeant Vitharana. He was the driver of the amphibious vehicle that brought the much needed relief items across the lagoon to feed and clothe the people in affected villages. There was also Police Constable Nalaka Siriminda Moramada attached to a volunteer team led by Mr. Javana Fernando that was distributing relief items to affected villages. They were operating in the area with two four wheel drive Toyota pickup vehicles.

The then Chairman of the Lahugala Pradeshiya Sabha complained to me that the Chief Inspector S.N.Gunaratne was distributing relief items to the Muslims and that the Sinhalese people of Panama had only received a pittance. When I questioned the Chief Inspector in this regard his reply was that the village of Panama was not as badly affected as Arugambay, Ulla, Kudakalli and Pasarachcheni to warrant any special treatment.

Let us now consider what happened to Sergeant Vitharana and the Police Constable Nalaka Siriminda Moramada subsequently. Sergeant Vitharana had served in the STF for nearly seventeen years and was to retire soon. However his passion to undertake humanitarian services beyond the call of duty made him volunteer to provide drinking water to Pada Yatra pilgrims at the Okanda Devale. He had delivered sixteen bowser loads drinking water from 24th of July 2006 to 7th of August 2006, which amounted to

48000 liters to pilgrims at the Okanda Devale, who were predominantly Tamil. To him as well as to all other STF personnel race and religion was of no relevance for they had been trained to treat all human beings with much love and compassion.

He left for the Okanda Devale with another such bowser load of drinking water on the 8th of August 2006, together with Police Constable Nalaka Siriminda Moramada. At about 1120 hours when they were passing Panakala Kalapuwa, LTTE terrorists activated a claymore mine that was fixed on to a tree. The explosion killed both sergeant Vitharana and Constable Nalaka Moramada who were in the front compartment of the bowser. The LTTE terrorist removed the weapons and other military items that were in their possession. Sergeant Vitharana's wife is now a widow with two children while Constable Nalaka Moramada's newly married wife is also a widow today. The international humanitarian organizations that leave no stone unturned to give maximum publicity to the so called atrocities by the Security Forces, sans any evidence, observed a noticeable silence with regard to the above incident, where an abundance of evidence was available to identify the LTTE as the perpetrators of this despicable act.

Chief Inspector S.N.Gunaratne, the Officer Commanding the Srastrawela STF camp who was the saviour of the Muslim people in the Arugambay and adjacent villages soon after the tsunami, was relieved of his command on or about the 20th of September 2006 and transferred out of the area, heeding to a request made by the very same Muslim people that he had helped so much. What was the cause for this Muslim community to become so ungrateful?

Chief Inspector S.N.Gunaratne was a lover of the environment. He is an officer who will not hesitate to implement the law of the land to protect the environment. He would not tolerate either the illegal felling of forest or encroachment into forest or coastal reserves by any community. Muslims were felling the jungle selling the timber and encroaching into forest and coastal reserves in his area of responsibility with impunity. He found it difficult if not impossible to tolerate this mass scale destruction of the environment. About a month ago he had arrested some Muslims who were transporting massive tree trunks in twenty two carts after felling them illegally. They were handed over to the local police. This did not deter the Muslims from felling trees and encroaching into forest reservations. He continued to apply pressure on the Muslims who were illegally felling timber in the forest reservations by arresting another group on 16th of September 2006. Twenty carts were taken into custody and produced before the forest officer with the felled timber.

Chief Inspector's action against the illicit felling of timber provided the LTTE with a golden opportunity to incite the Muslim community against the STF. On 17th of September 2006 the LTTE hacked to death ten Muslim workers who were repairing the sluice gate and the irrigation canal of the Raddela tank. Before the sole survivor could speak out the truth, a harthal was surreptitiously instigated by the racketeers who were involved in large scale illegal timber felling business, making use of the gullible Muslim community, who were mostly supportive of the illegal land encroachment by their kith and kin. Five STF personnel returning from leave to the Srastrawela STF camp were attack and injured by a Muslim mob on the morning of the 20th of September 2006 and

the STF was compelled to fire in self defense. As a result of this action fourteen Muslims in the mob were injured. The infuriated Muslims next attacked the Sinhala village of Ulla and set fire to a small hotel owned by a Sinhalese. About twenty five families living in the village of Ulla subsequently fled to Panama in boats, fearing further attacks by Muslims. In an effort to calm down the tensions, the authorities decided to make Chief Inspector S.N.Gunaratne the scapegoat.

However the Defence Ministry website published the following information on 22nd September 2006.

Pottuvil Massacre, clearly an LTTE act – Muslim community leaders in the East

Several community organizations in the eastern province have expressed their conviction over the LTTE's involvement in the massacre of eleven innocent Muslim civilians in Pottuvil on 16th of September. Secretary to the Ministry of Defence Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapakse has been informed in writing by many such community organizations that the heinous crime was undoubtedly perpetrated by the LTTE terrorists, denying the speculations on Security Forces involvement.

The Akkaraipattu fish vendors' society while condemning the crime stated that this massacre was aimed to ignite tension between the Muslims and Sinhalese in the eastern area and to destabilize the ground situation in favour of the LTTE. They said that this was opted to weaken the development in the eastern province.

The Akkaraipattu traders association stated that this brutal crime was an LTTE effort to tarnish the good image of the Security Forces. The organizations also reiterated that the attempt was to disturb the rapid development processes put in place by the government in the area. The Akkaraipattu Jumma Grand Mosque priests while condemning the massacre said "we vehemently deny LTTE's accusation leveled against the SL Security Forces as it is clear that no organization other than the LTTE could commit such atrocities."

It is now revealed that the LTTE was backed by a group of racketeers engaged in large scale illegal timber business in the area to commit the crime. The Special Task Force (STF) has taken stern action to prevent this illegal business which had been continued for a long time. It is reliably understood that the racketeers had been funding the LTTE for providing the illicit timber cut down from the natural forests until the STF probed into the business. Irked by these moves, the STF said that some racketeers were organizing agitations putting the civilians in the forefront.

Any community be it the Sinhalese, Tamil or the Muslim should not be allowed to break the law of the land with impunity. In practically all the Muslim villages in and around Pottuvil area and also in the Sinhalese village of Panama, I have noticed that the electricity is tapped from the national grid with impunity. Majority of the consumers of electricity in these villages throw a hook on to the power line at nightfall and obtain their electricity free of charge. I have seen with my own eyes Chief Inspector Gunaratne ordering the removal of such illegal connections on many occasions.

To get a clear understanding of the ground situation one needs to clearly understand the historical background behind the village of Raddela where this massacre of ten Muslims took place. Raddela was a Sinhalese village established on or about 1818 soon after the Uva Wellassa rebellion. There were about thirty Sinhalese families cultivating approximately 450 acres of paddy land until 1990 in this village, which they left due to the deterioration of the security situation as a result of the LTTE threat that intensified after 1990.

Some of these cultivators sold their land to the Muslims, while the others left the area due to the increasing LTTE threat to take up residence in the village of Panama. The paddy lands abandoned by the Sinhalese were occupied by the Muslims, who paid ransom money to the LTTE to cultivate these lands. A few years later the Raddela tank breached and the security situation also deteriorated further, making it difficult if not impossible even for the Muslims to cultivate this track of land.

After the cease fire agreement the security situation was conducive to recommence cultivation in this area and therefore the Raddela tank was restored. The Muslims moved in once more to cultivate the paddy lands. This resulted in certain amount of animosity among the Sinhalese, who had lost their paddy lands and were now living in Panama. With a further improvement of the security situation, more Muslim families began to move into this area and they began to encroach into the forest reservation and over 1500 acres of land in the reservation were cleared by these Muslim settlers. They also commenced encroaching into the coastal reservation in and around Kudakalli and Sastrawela area.

When I first observed this illegal activity escalating, I addressed a letter to Mr. Ajita de Costa, the Chairman of the Central Environmental Authority on 31st July 2002. He immediately requested the Conservator General of Forests Mr. Sarath Fernando to conduct an urgent investigation as soon as possible and to take necessary action in this regard. Since nothing happened I addressed a letter to Hon. Rukman Senanayake, the Minister of Forestry and Environment on 8th September 2002, with copies to the Governor North East Province, the Government Agent Ampara, the Deputy Inspector General of Police Eastern Range, the Chairman Central Environmental Authority, the Conservator General of Forests and the Director General of Coast Conservation.

As a result an inquiry was conducted in this regard by the Assistant Superintendent of Police Akkaraipattu and in his letter to the Senior Superintendent of Police Ampara, a copy of which was also sent to me, he had confirmed these encroachments by Muslim settlers and had recommended that the Divisional Secretaries be informed through the District Secretary to prevent further encroachment and also to instruct them to invalidate any permits that have been already issued.

The Chairman Central Environmental Authority who received a copy of my letter to the Minister of Forestry and Environment also initiated action by organizing a meeting at the Pottuvil Divisional Secretariat on 13th January 2003, under the Chairmanship of the Government Agent Ampara. Many representatives from concerned government

departments including the Chairman Central Environmental Authority, the Conservator General of Forests, and representatives from several non governmental organizations were present. At this meeting the Additional Government Agent of Ampara was appointed as the Chairman of a committee that was formed with representatives from both the government and non governmental organizations. This committee was tasked with the responsibility of ascertaining the damage caused to the environment by encroachment of forest, river and coastal reservations and requested to recommend ways and means to prevent a further deterioration of the situation. The committee was also requested to ascertain the validity of all permits issued thus far under the Land Development Ordinance in the Pottuvil area. A decision was also taken to forward its findings and recommendations to the Government Agent Ampara in six weeks.

Accordingly this committee met once more on 21st January 2003, under the chairmanship of the Additional Government Agent Ampara before its mandate was scuttled for no valid reason by vested interests. At this meeting the Land Officer of Ampara confirmed to me personally that most of the land development permits said to have been issued by the Pottuvil Divisional Secretariat were fraudulent documents.

I visited the area on 2nd of July 2003 and was appalled at the extent of encroachment that had taken place in the forest, coastal and river reservations since my last visit to the area and therefore addressed a letter to the then Prime Minister Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe on 14th July 2003, with copies to the Ministry of Lands, the Ministry of Forestry and Environment, the Governor North East Province, the Chairman Central Environmental Authority, The Government Agent Ampara, the Deputy Inspector General of Police Eastern Range, the Conservator General of Forests, the Director General of Coast Conservation and the Commissioner of Lands. The Prime Minister's office forwarded my letter to the Secretary Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, but no action was taken to correct the situation.

Since the only other person to whom I could make representations was the President, but knowing very well that the results would be the same, I left the matter in the hands of the gods that protect our country. On the 26th of December 2004 the gods took action and the houses built on coastal reservations were washed off with a vengeance. However the encroachment of forest reserves is still continuing with impunity and Chief Inspector S.N. Gunaratne who was the only person that had the guts to implement the law of the land to prevent this colossal environmental destruction has been transferred out of the area.

It is hoped that the present President who is more positive in his approach to solve national problems such as this will take necessary action to halt the large scale environmental destruction in the Pottuvil area. If he fails to do so, time is perhaps ripe for the gods who are protecting this land to act with a vengeance once more to prevent such activity for all time.

2^{8th} September 2006.