

Peace Work in Sri Lanka's War

BY ANGELA PINCHERO



Monument for the disappeared. One lost face is on each tile.

Angela Pinchero is a Canadian working with Nonviolent Peaceforce in Sri Lanka. Nobody said it would be easy

On the first days of January this year the government officially gave two weeks notice that it was formally pulling out of the ceasefire. For months or even a year before, it had felt foolish to talk about the 'ceasefire' while listening to nightly shelling or after passing by camps housing tens of thousands of displaced civilians in hot tents on flooded land. However, once it was officially gone, everyone discussed what to expect.

It clearly meant that the war would move north, that the government would likely advance on the area now controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the symbolic heartland of their support and their de facto capital. Rumors say that almost every family has had someone recruited into the LTTE. This area had already been shelled and partly blockaded for over a year, leaving people in this poor area even more destitute.

It also meant that the LTTE would increase their attacks on soft civilian targets and pull the security forces south. This happened right away. The week the ceasefire ended, there were numerous heart-breaking attacks on civilians, including bombs in shopping malls, civilian buses, and train stations. Pictures of beautiful school children who had been

killed in these attacks started appearing on political posters around town with slogans that supported the war and condemned human rights advocates and the international community.

Civilian defence committees were established as watch-dogs, the ordinary person's contribution to security. They started spotting 'the enemy' everywhere. In the capital, Colombo, police continued their policy of registering occupants of all households in the city. In June of 2007 Tamil civilians in boardinghouses had been put onto buses and sent back to whatever district they came from. Now they were suddenly rounded up by the thousands and detained for checking. Some civilians told us that they were now looking differently at shopping bags and parcels on public transit.

The official end of the ceasefire also meant a rising death toll among combatants. In fact the only coverage of the military operations is the contested daily death tolls each side of the conflict claim to have taken from the other. The head of the army made pledges about capturing the North before his upcoming retirement.

The international community meanwhile started their coordination efforts, anticipating the displacement of thousands of civilians if there is a full scale attempt to take the North. Humanitarian organizations have started submitting proposals, asking the largest donors to respond to the anticipated humanitarian consequences of new battles, while debating how far they can go in expressing political opinions about the decisions that caused these crises in the first place. Unlike the tsunami, which everyone agreed was a tragedy, talking openly about the hardships of civilians displaced by war is politically controversial and can create serious backlashes.

SO WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A FOREIGNER IN SRI LANKA?

I am a foreigner promoting nonviolent problem-solving — a peace activist in a time of war. As someone with occasional access to a borrowed land cruiser, I find it uncomfortable to pull up in this expensive, white, flagged NGO vehicle to offer help to those who have lost so much. I have never allowed myself to share an opinion as to what is a 'solution' to this conflict; I feel it is not my right. However, I can't help forming opinions about the strategies of war as a result of my experiences here. I have held the hands of widows and served tea to women who have just had their children stolen to

become fighters. I have watched bright young Sri Lankan boys and girls give up their studies for labor in the Middle East to avoid being caught between the strategies of armed groups and the security forces.

We are officially neutral toward the parties in the conflict and the ethnic communities in this country, but it is naive to consider the international community or any peace group as removed from the conflict.

Recently the government announced elections in the East, and our original and longest partners asked us to observe them. We agreed, hoping to increase the scrutiny of the elections by civil society and, by helping the national organization monitor the elections, to reduce the violence and intimidation to which their monitors are exposed. Even though it was simply a municipal election in a rural area, the election was extremely politicized.

The TMVP is a political party led by Karuna, a breakaway leader who defected from the LTTE in 2004. Various international bodies have identified this group as a recruiter of children. It has also been blamed for scores of killings and abductions, tit-for-tat killings with the LTTE, and high level assassinations of academics, journalists, and politicians. In late 2006 the Government of Sri Lanka was outraged by the accusations of Ambassador Alan Rock, an advisor to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict. Ambassador Rock and Human Rights Watch said that the government was complicit with this group.

As I write this, the TMVP is running in coalition with the Government in the municipal elections of the Batticaloa District. Some say it is a step toward restoring democracy in the East. Rights groups recently got together to say it is a whitewash designed to legitimize the TMVP and fulfill a government agenda. Representatives from the parties that received the largest support in the general and presidential elections have not run in these local elections, citing fear for their lives. One pre-election shooting of a popular school teacher is believed to be the result of his refusal to run for election.

CRITICISM FROM BOTH SIDES

We started getting complaints immediately and one group dropped out of a workshop we sponsored. We were misquoted in the government press as hailing their security measures. We are being requested to support the election observation as foreigners who are clearly at less risk of personal harm

or coercion than people whose lives and families are here. Yet simultaneously we are branded as co-conspirators legitimizing a group whose human rights abuses have sent a steady stream of frightened, grieving people to our door for the last four years.

A CEREMONY ABOUT LIFE

I was privileged to attend a ceremony of poetry, pictures, and stories by people with whom we work. The theme was the value of life. There was a small, sad, beautiful booklet too of writing and images of activities in the district. Included were images from a small ceremony held in our office in 2005 where families of the victims of tit-for-tat killings came together to mourn. It had reflections and poems gathered from meetings of women who shared their experience of having their children abducted, often by rival groups. One poem was dedicated to a young female fighter who had been raped, murdered, and left anonymously in a school.

The booklet is wholly the work and property of the women and men about whom it was written, and who put it together; they are the same persons. But in its pages I can see reflections of our work as 'outsiders.' We had provided the safe location for the meeting, we had driven to the homes of remote families, and when women weren't sure where to go, they had come knocking at the office/house where we lived, which allowed us to introduce them to each other.

That day I met many people with whom I had worked. I met a man who had boldly helped free his captured son, and who was taken and tortured; he now finds it difficult to run his little fruit business. I met the bright young man whose abduction triggered a collective intervention and who told me that three years later his mother is still thankful.

I also saw women whose stories didn't have happy endings. For example, I met one of my friends initially when her husband was taken for ransom until her fighter-son was turned over. I met her again, hours after her son was shot protecting the family's paddy-field from wild elephants, I met her many times while her husband was missing, I met her husband when he was finally released, and I met her again that day after he had again been abducted and shot dead.

I met one of the women I had accompanied to a militant group's office years before so they could demand answers about their missing loved ones. They received no answers, but they needed to de-

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mand the answers anyway. After many months of meetings in the capital, I was reminded that day in a rural hall that there is value in doing peace work during a war. Some of these people came great distances from their villages to participate in a simple ceremony about the value of life. They came because they wanted to stay connected to people with whom they had shared experiences and struggles. In many small ways we had supported them in their journeys. Now, heading back to my job in the capital, I am supposed to translate those instances of support into 'quantifiable impact indicators' for funders, so we can keep paying our staff.

It is easier to explain the role of our team in a local 'Early Response Network' of Tamil and Muslim NGOs and community groups. We have had two meetings in our 'neutrally' located office with the participants. At the end of the second meeting they drew a picture of their network. I was disturbed to see that we were at the top with a dozen little lines linked to each of them. They explained to me that there was still not enough trust among participants, so they wanted it that way. For now, we were asked to play an important central role as 'foreigners' who had a connection to each of them, even though the entire meetings were in Tamil, a language they spoke but we foreigners did not. I would never have noticed mistrust among that mixed and enthusiastic crowd.

I was a bit surprised when they announced that all of them, including the Muslims, would travel together to a remote area, through numerous checkpoints, to hold their next meeting with the NGO located farthest from town. Clearly this was a conscious decision. The Muslim participants were not only agreeable, but determined to go, though this involved travel to an entirely Tamil area and possibly negative reactions from members of their own community once they returned.

BRINGING PARTNERS TO COLOMBO

Our group is also planning to bring partners to Colombo from the different rural areas where we have offices. The agenda includes issues of human rights and documentation — legal literacy on laws that in theory should apply to the areas where they live. The goal of the workshop is simple: connection. We intend to foster the human connection of our partners in different areas with each other and with civil society in Colombo, including international actors. It is an opportunity for our rural friends to tell their stories to the city people I meet regularly. Here we are the conveners, coordinators, administrators. In other words, we are hosts.

I saw a recent video of a bus that was attacked in the northern area of the country. Many children were on board. The pictures of the dead were graphic, but it was the cries of the living that stayed with me. An older man in a worn cloth-sarong and flip-flops pulled up on his push-bike and raced for one little boy who clearly was already dead. Unlike the smooth youthful body, this man looked weathered and frail. He lifted the boy, looked around for help, and, wailing, raced with the boy toward the one ambulance that came.

Seeing that clip, I think of the many other mothers and fathers I've met who could not protect their child when the war closed in around them. War is not as heartbreaking when you look at the death toll as when you watch what it does to the living.

When I'm not in the areas that have been the conflict zone for over two decades, I hear a very different story of the war. Everyone asks whose 'fault' it was: the government? The LTTE? The international community? All of their criticisms may be true, but I would never debate such a thing in front of par-



ents who have raised a child to adulthood in a war-torn area. That is not what they want to talk about either.

Most Sri Lankans are sensible about taking responsibility as a community for the children. No one wants to opt out of school fees because they don't have children. Everyone pets and picks up each other's children, lifts them onto buses and insists they sit on their lap. But now these children are turned into propaganda tools to support one or other side of the conflict, which has been passed on from their grandparents.

One side doesn't want to give up its rights or homeland. The other doesn't want to give up its country, power, or culture. Yet much has already been given up and many young people have moved away.

Whenever someone asks me to provide accompaniment, I find myself questioning our role, our limits. I question how to do this job in such a politicized and controversial environment, while remaining non-partisan — even if it doesn't always appear that we are. Balancing the opportunities and limitations, the implications of every decision, and my ever-changing understanding of the situation keeps me on my toes. ■

Angela Pinchero has been working with Nonviolent Peaceforce in Sri Lanka for the past four-and-a-half years, and most recently served as an election observer in the eastern area of the country.