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## **SRI LANKA**

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*Oswald Firth, OMI, Assistant General*

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*A. Jeevendra Paul OMI*

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## SRI LANKA

### A Country in Search of its Identity

*Oswald Firth, OMI, Assistant General*

Legend has it that this island of 65,610 sq.km. has all the resemblances of the paradise referred to in the Bible. The temperate climate, cascading water falls, rolling hills with lush tea plantations, exotic fauna and flora, sprawling rice fields, rich medicinal herbs growing in abundance, palm fringed beaches and the calm and quiet village life is sufficient proof that the legend has a foundation in reality. Today, however, that “paradise” has been transformed into one of the bloodiest killing fields of Asia.

Today, a population of nearly 21 million people who inhabit this graceful island are in search of an identity. The majority Sinhalese (74%) would claim that this is their unique home land, based on an epic chronicle, “*The Mahawamsa*,” which contains more myth than history. The 12% Tamils lay equal claims to the North and East of the country as being their traditional home land where they have lived from time immemorial and where they feel they can live in security and peace. The Muslims who form 8% of the population lay equal claim to their rightful place in the Sri Lankan society and demand equal treatment as citizens in all spheres of life.

A common Sri Lankan identity since the country gained independence from Britain in 1948 seems a far cry and a distant dream. Numerous treaties guaranteeing equal treatment to minority groups have been torn to shreds. After nearly 65,000 people from all communities have lost their lives due to an internecine war, and over one million people have been uprooted from their homes or driven out of the country in search of security, a common identity is perhaps an amorphous aspiration that will never be realized. What we are experiencing today in Sri Lanka is a “paradise lost”. The wounds created by years of hatred, suspicion, and mistrust between the communities are so deep that one doubts whether they would ever be healed during our lifetime.

#### A Flawed Independence

While the local leadership from the three communities replaced the British rule in the Island in 1948, with the passage of time, the Tamils, who were a majority in the North and the East of Sri Lanka, began to demand greater autonomy in various areas of governance, since they felt that privileges enjoyed by the Sinhalese were not equally made available to the Tamils. Provisions for the equal use of the Tamil language, equal opportunities for university education and projects for economic development for the North and East were hardly ever implemented by a government that was governed mainly by the Sinhala leadership. Political expediency had made the Sinhala leadership ignore and even deny the fact that Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural society.

Repeated requests by the Tamil leadership to be treated as equal citizens of Sri Lanka fell on deaf ears. Non-violent protests by the Tamils to obtain their just demands and political rights were often violently suppressed. Frustrations rose to a boiling point in 1983 when Tamil youth resorted to arms against the State. All attempts at resolving the crisis through negotiations have resulted in failure. Even a Cease-fire Agreement brokered by Norway in February 2002, which drastically reduced the number of deaths and set the tone for a negotiated settlement between the LTTE and the government, eventually failed because of the latter’s failure to observe clauses in the agreement which called for a withdrawal of the military from private houses and public buildings, such as schools, and prevented many families in the North and East from engaging in their legitimate livelihood. Since then, both parties have not had the political will to make the Cease-Fire Agreement work, resulting in violations of the clauses of the CFA by both sides.

While answering a question put to him on Sri Lanka, the Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen observed on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2007 that Sri Lanka (at the initial stages of its independence) successfully implemented a number of welfare programmes such as free education, free health, etc., to its people which should have contributed to peace in that country. But, by taking a position of upholding exclusive status to Buddhism and Sinhalese, it isolated other sections of the society from having a sense of national identity. Now, there is no likelihood that the Sri Lankan state will go back from that position. Sri Lanka didn't realize the richness in plurality", said Professor Sen to a tightly packed audience in Oslo.

### **A Shattered Pluralist Society**

Sri Lanka, with one of the highest literacy rates in Asia, and where the four major religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity claim adherents among the 20 million population, could have served as an ideal model of inter-ethnic co-existence and inter-religious harmony. The hopes for such an ideal pluralist society in the whole of Asia are today extremely thin and even non-existent. In certain instances, religion has been transformed into a political weapon to declare a unitary and uniform state where minority ethnic and religious communities are viewed with suspicion as being pro LTTE or pro-terrorist. Any civic minded organization demonstrating in favour of peace and a negotiated settlement to the persisting crisis is perceived as anti-government and are subject to police harassment.

Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, the director of Colombo-based think tank, Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), in a discussion titled, "Sri Lanka's Elusive Peace Process – a Role for the United States Government?" at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, characterized Sri Lanka as "the worst place in the world for civilians, in the past 15 months," and spoke of the need for increased awareness for the humanitarian dimension to revitalize the peace process.

There is a saying that when elephants fight, it is the poor ants that get trampled underfoot. This metaphor fits Sri Lanka's current crisis extremely well. While

the government of Sri Lanka is at war with the Liberation Tigers (LTTE), it is the poor civilians that are either caught in the cross fire or displaced from their homes. The space for human rights violations will continue to increase, critically argued Dr. Saravanamuttu, as the parties pursue the military option, where at present, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and LTTE have become "mirror images" of each other.

### **Violations of Human Rights**

One of the most dehumanizing factors of the present phase of the war is the blatant violation of human rights on a massive scale. Hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians in the war zones have been driven out of their homes. Nearly all of them have lost their belongings and are unable to pursue their livelihoods. This is particularly true of farmers and fishermen whose working hours have been restricted by incessant curfews. Most children have been deprived of their education and some of them have been drawn into the war as "child soldiers", both by the LTTE and factions aligned with the government security forces. Abduction and extortion have become so common that according to newspaper reports, an abduction takes place at the rate of one every fifteen minutes. The perpetrators of these crimes have yet to be identified and brought to justice. The ones abducted are mainly Tamil and Muslim businessmen and there are strong indications that the government security forces are involved at least in some of these crimes. Whenever the war intensifies civilians are being used as human shields and cases of forced resettlement without adequate security are now a common occurrence.

Another target of human rights violations have been the Universities in the East and the North. The Vice-Chancellor of the University of the East was abducted several months ago and his whereabouts are still unknown. On 7<sup>th</sup> May 2007, at a meeting attended by the Bishop of Jaffna, the Rev. Thomas Savundtanayagam, the Commander of the Army in Jaffna (the North), Major General G.A. Chandrasiri, the Vice-Chancellor of the Jaffna University, Prof. Balasundarampillai, and heads of non-governmental organizations, the Bishop called for the immediate release of four University students who had been

abducted and he condemned the death notices issued to the University Staff.

There been cases where workers of humanitarian agencies have been shot and murdered. Investigations into such cases have often been prevented due to state bureaucracy. The murder of 17 workers of the international non-governmental organization, *Action Contre la Faim*, and the abduction and killing of two officers of the *International Red Cross* in broad day light are cases in point. It needs to be said that both the government and the Liberation Tigers, as well as armed factions who are roaming the country, are responsible for these numerous violations.

The most recent incident (7<sup>th</sup> June 2007) was the forced eviction, in the dead of night, of nearly 400 Tamils living in lodgings in Colombo and their being moved in buses to the war zone. Fortunately, the Supreme Court ruled this to be against the Constitution and a violation of fundamental human rights. Public uproar, the Opposition in parliament and the press played a vital role in condemning this shameful act which further justified the LTTE's claim for a separate state. British Foreign Office Minister Kim Howells, speaking to BBC on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2007 said, "The abductions have got to cease, the human rights abuses have got to cease... The kind of tactics that were used to clear Tamil people out of Colombo suburbs must never happen again."

The violations of Human Rights have peaked to such a disconcerting and frightening level that all attempts have been made to prevent international agencies from investigating such abuses. Recently, security forces did not allow the UN Commissioner, Ms. Louise Arbour, to meet the Jaffna citizens on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2007, and to listen to their woes on the pretext that the Sri Lankan government had taken the necessary measures to curb any such violations. Around 2000 people were gathered near the UNHCR office in Templer Road, Jaffna since 7 AM to meet Ms. Arbour but they were chased away when she arrived there (*Lanka News*, 16/10/2007).

The fact is that "Sri Lanka has also witnessed a steady erosion of the independence and effectiveness of many of its democratic institutions including the police, the public service, Parliament, the Attorney

General's Department, the judiciary; and most recently, the Human Rights Commission and the Police Commission" (*Letter addressed by 38 Human Rights Organizations in Sri Lanka to Ms. Arbour; UN Human Rights Commissioner, 10/10/2007*).

What boggles the mind is that the government in its budget allocations for the year 2007-2008, has earmarked US \$ 1.4 billion (SL Rupees 166 billion) for defence spending (17.9% of the total budget), while allocating a meagre 5.25% for education and morsel of 6.1% for health and a scrap of 3.7% for agriculture (*Sunday Leader*, 14/10/2007). Sri Lanka, the land where Buddhism has been rooted for over 2500 years, is fast losing its identity as the land of the "Compassionate One" and is gradually degenerating into a state without a conscience.

### Way out of the Crisis

A question that has been repeatedly asked is whether, after nearly 25 years of fighting between the military and the LTTE, with over 65,000 dead and hundreds of thousands displaced, there is no solution to this terrible crisis. Many attempts of resolving the crisis through dialogue have failed because there has been no political will on the part of the government to resolve the crisis. There is also intransigence on the part of the military, extremist political parties like the JHU (party of Buddhist monks) and the JVP (an extremist nationalist party), who want the crisis to be solved by a weakening or a total elimination of the LTTE, whatever be the cost to lives and property. The LTTE, for its part, has the weapons, funds from the Tamil *Diaspora* abroad, years of experience in the art of warfare and therefore is determined to fight the government till a satisfactory political solution is found. The Sinhala extreme nationalists demand a 'Unitary Sinhala State' with Buddhism as the national religion. The moderates would opt for a 'Federal State' based on a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Constitution. There are others who maintain the view that immediate external intervention, by the UN for example, is necessary to arrest the chaos, and bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. Whatever the proposed options, we Sri Lankans, with our religious leaders and political think-tanks, will have

to craft the most suitable model of governance for this country, and have the determination to make it work.

The view of President Mahinda Rajapakse, who came into power 21 months ago with a thin majority, is that the government is winning the war and that the LTTE has to be weakened before its leaders are brought to the negotiating table. For the government, this is a war against terrorism, and the violation of human rights, suppression of freedom of the press, breaking up peace demonstrations, deaths and

displacement and the economic woes of the people are necessary consequences which the people should bear up till such time as the government completes its task. The question remains as to how many more deaths and violations of human rights are needed before the government achieves its objectives. In the final analysis, is it to be a Sri Lanka built on the blood and sufferings of its own people?! The government has perhaps forgotten that it is killing its own people, irrespective of whether they are Sinhala, Tamils or Muslims.

## Oblate Missionaries in Sri Lanka

*A. Jeevendra Paul OMI*

### Missionaries from Europe

The Oblate presence in the island of Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) took root in 1847 when St. Eugene de Mazenod, then the bishop of Marseille, sent four European Oblate missionaries to the island. Sri Lanka was the first love of the Founder on the continent of Asia. Now there are two full-fledged Oblate provinces in Sri Lanka: the Province of Colombo and the Province of Jaffna. The Colombo Province is blessed with 159 Oblates, including 33 scholastics. Jaffna has 107 Oblates, including 39 scholastics. Age wise, most of the Oblates are young. That many more young men are aspiring to become Oblates in Sri Lanka is a hopeful sign for the whole Oblate Congregation and the Church. The Oblates are the largest religious Congregation of men in the country. They are actively engaged in a variety of apostolate in almost all of the eleven local dioceses.

The life and ministry of the past zealous Oblates and the rich traditions and heritage left by the European missionaries are still alive in the memories of the people. Their great vision and missionary contributions can be summarized in this way:

### A glorious past

- The building up of the local Church and the training of an indigenous clergy.
- The construction of numerous churches and several Catholic institutions.
- Their pioneering missionary activities and their qualitative witness of being very “close to the poor people”.
- There were many outstanding Oblates who have left indelible impact on the lives of the people through their excellence and their creativity, especially in their missionary ventures and in the

fields of education and development.

- Sri Lanka has in turn begun to send missionaries abroad as pioneers to establish new missions in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh while many missionaries to other Asia-Oceania and African and even European countries.

### Local Oblates

At present in Sri Lanka, there remain only four retired Oblates from Europe. However, their vision and responsibilities are now being faithfully carried on by native Oblates. The Oblate vocation is ever fresh and relevant to the present time, even when times are fast changing and new needs are arising. In a remarkable way, the Oblates carry on by renewing their commitments with zeal and creativity.

### Ever ready to change

True to their missionary nature, they constantly experience a transition from traditionally structured ministries to new forms of ministry. In former times, most of the Oblates were parish priests or managers of dioceses. That was the need of that time. Today, they are more open to new forms of serving humanity by engaging themselves in integral forms of evangelization, such as, social rehabilitation and, psychological counseling and spiritual direction, caring for and assisting the displaced, the refugees, orphans, widows, poor children and school dropouts. These are the new poor of the today’s Church in Sri Lanka.

### Civil war and tsunami

For the past 25 year, Sri Lanka has had to face an ongoing ethnic conflict. It is estimated that over 75,000 people were killed; over six hundred thousand have left the country seeking asylum in foreign countries; more than one million people are

internally displaced. The civil war has affected all sectors of society. In addition to this unfortunate situation, on December 26, 2004, tsunami tidal waves hit the shores of the Northeast and the South of Sri Lanka. It is estimated that in these coastal regions, 37,000 people were killed, several thousands were missing and several hundreds were made homeless. Hundreds of children perished in the waters and hundreds were orphaned as many adults were swept away by the waves of the tsunami.

### **Relief in times of pain**

Against the background of these unfortunate situations, the Oblates launched several rehabilitation programs for the people, such as, building temporary sheds, providing food and relief supplies and other emergency services. There were hundreds of Oblate collaborators and donors from all over the world who generously contributed financially to make the Oblate presence effective in these times of great need.

### **Children's Homes**

The Oblates have been managing two big orphanages, one in the South: "St. Vincent Home" at Maggona and the other in the North "Amala Aanai-Children's Home" at Mulankawil. After the tsunami, the Oblates of the Jaffna Province started three more homes for the victimized children. Caring for these underprivileged, poor and orphaned children is a need of the times. It is typical of the Oblates to respond to the urgent needs of the times.

### **Children's Movement**

The 'La-kri-vi' movement (Valiant Children of Action.) was founded by the Oblates and is under their full responsibility. It is a movement for the integral development of Sri Lankan children, irrespective of race, religion or sex. It is open to all children between the ages of 5 and 15, and it is run by the children themselves under the guidance of volunteers who serve as promoters (animators) of the movement.

The vision of the movement is to create a new world through children. The desire is to cultivate and develop spirituality in children through physical and

mental transformation and also develop their personalities and leadership qualities through the movement. Presently it has a membership of over 9000 children in about 400 village level 'cells' in 40 districts under the guidance of about 450 youth volunteers who serve as promoters (animators) of the movement. It is an accepted fact that all cell activities help children to deepen their faith, while the presence and sharing of children of other faiths serve to promote their understanding and respect for others religious convictions and practices, which is very necessary in a multi religious society like Sri Lanka.

### **A psycho spiritual approach**

The Oblates have also been serving in a very specialized area of the apostolate namely, psychological counseling. The five well recognized Centers for Counseling and Spiritual renewal both in the South and in the North are rendering unique services of healing, guidance and helping people to lead life with a sense of meaning and direction. The Oblates who became qualified themselves in Canada and the USA in the fields of counseling and spiritual direction were able to train many more lay people and continue to render services to their clients in their own local languages. The programs have saved many from a life of deep wounds, sadness and destruction.

### **Oblate parishes**

The Oblates have willingly taken charge of parishes situated in the most difficult and missionary areas of the Colombo, Jaffna, Mannar, Trincomalee and Badulla dioceses. The bishops have invited the Oblates to take over certain areas for a long period of time and to invest a lot of hard labor, money and efforts into developing the people's lives. There are nearly ten parishes of this nature in the country. Almost all the Oblate parishes are situated in mission areas, namely, with people who are not Catholics: either Buddhist or Hindu and economically poor. By profession, the people are laborers or plantation workers or poor farmers who suffer social discrimination. In a literal sense, they are the most abandoned. Serving in these parishes is not easy. The missionaries have to travel long distances and



the mission houses often do not have basic facilities like electricity or running water, etc. In these parishes, the Oblates run several programs like preschools, programs for the empowerment of women, non-formal educational activities, tuition and other income generating programs and so on in order to enhance the lifestyle of the poor.

### **Mission preaching band**

It is significant that the Oblates are known for their traditional apostolate under the name of Grand Mission Preachers. The community of the preaching band was started in 1948 at "Nazareth House" at Wennappuwa in the diocese of Chilaw. Another preaching community was started in Jaffna in 1960 and presently is situated at "Amaithi-Aham" in Vavuniya in the diocese of Mannar. It continues this typical Oblate mission which was the first approach which our Founder himself adopted for the Church that had been wounded by the French revolution. These communities have been engaged in the preaching ministry as a specialized apostolate reaching out to people throughout the country. However, with the rapid and profound socio-economic changes taking place in the country, the provinces are rethinking their approach and adopting new pastoral strategies to achieve better results through preaching the Word of God. Among other things, they are adopting the modern means of communication.

The purpose of the mission preaching is to bring about renewal and reconciliation on the personal and community level, forming the laity to show leadership and share in the responsibilities of the Church. It is an opportunity and a moment of grace for the Catholics as well as the non-Catholics, since most of the events are held in the open airs and in the streets, thus making them accessible to all people of all faiths. They emphasize the themes of "Coming back home," "Return to the Father," and "Jesus the Good Shepherd." During the mission they visit families, instruct and conduct workshops and seminar programs for school children, youth and adults and celebrate the Eucharist with the respective groups. They give priority to the remote villages and countryside parishes and missions. Making use of the media, they reach out to Catholics and non-

Catholics by staging street plays, conducting the Way of the Cross, the rosary and Blessed Sacrament processions in the public streets and other open-air spaces. The Oblate preachers with their white cassocks and their Oblate Cross are appealing signs and images of God speaking to the people.

### **Marian devotion**

Oblates around the world are promoters of Marian devotion. Sri Lanka is blessed with hundreds of churches dedicated to Our Lady as the result of the Oblate missionary efforts. In Sri Lanka, Oblates administer shrines and renewal centers in order to render spiritual services and bring about spiritual renewal to those under their care.

### **Teaching ministry**

When we count the number of Oblates who are academically qualified, we find that quite a good number are engaged in teaching in schools, universities and the major seminaries, teaching in both government-sponsored and private academic institutions. These are very good opportunities to reach out to the youth who need spiritual inspiration and guidance.

### **Beyond boundaries to internationality**

Among the young Oblates, there is a lot of willingness to serve beyond our geographical boundaries, reaching out to the poor and meeting the most urgent demands of the Church. The Oblates, as religious and seeing internationality as a value, place much importance on community life. In a country where there are violence, divisions and problems of mistrust, the Oblates, through regular renewal and animation programs, make efforts to revive and strengthen community life that has been affected by the hazards and barriers to travel and communications. They try to establish greater understanding and collaboration with the Oblates of the neighboring provinces and among the other religious congregations as a sign of greater unity and peace. These international, inter-congregational and interfaith experiences give them a greater sense of happiness and at the same time bear witness to true Christianity.

### Gifts of vocations

Thanks be to God, vocations in Sri Lanka have remained fairly steady. There are two junior seminaries, one in Colombo and the other in Jaffna, housing more than one hundred juniorists all together. In the pre-novitiate each year, nearly 10-15 candidates are formed. In the cool climate of Bandarawela, the Sacred Heart Novitiate is situated on a hill and accommodates novices, not only from Sri Lanka, but also from other Oblate delegations and missions: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Korea and Indonesia. There are two post-novitiate houses of formation: the Oblate Scholasticate in Kandy, affiliated with the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka, and De Mazenod Scholasticate, affiliated to the diocesan major seminary of Jaffna. The Oblates make every effort to foster vocations and to provide the candidates with qualitative formation, enabling them to become committed missionaries in the future. It is an important value to foster multi-cultural and inter-provincial collaborative efforts. It is also a constant challenge to train formators and to maintain more than one member in each formation house. In order to equip and update all members with new insights and skills, the provinces give priority to regular ongoing formation programs.

It is worth mentioning some of the **Oblate values**

that strengthen the Oblates of Sri Lanka:

- The sense of internationality; the support and encouragement given by Oblates in other parts of the world is very strong. The Oblates from developed countries continue to share financially in the life and mission of the Oblates.
- In spite of the many negative effects of the violence and ethnic conflicts, of natural calamities and of war, the Oblates have remained true to their vocation, due to their faith, mutual support, endurance and goodwill.
- In the recent past, the Oblates, through their hard work, have been able to achieve remarkable growth by establishing new Oblate communities, undertaking pioneering, specialized and relevant ministries, and consolidating some of their infrastructures.
- In the field of ongoing formation, the members of both provinces have been given opportunities for continued education and renewal in order to become capable missionaries in a fast changing world with many and new challenges.
- Amidst the dissension and grievances caused by the ethnic conflict in the country, both the Colombo and the Jaffna Provinces have been able to collaborate in the fields of administration, formation and the apostolate while continuing to promote justice and peace.

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C.P. 9061, 00100 ROMA-AURELIO, Italy  
Fax: (39) 06 39 37 53 22 E-mail : [information@omigen.org](mailto:information@omigen.org)