

itor', whose editor was in the country at that time, reported two singular incidents in the East. In separate incidents a train and a bus were stopped by the Tigers and the Tamils were ordered to separate themselves from the Muslims. The reasons were clear. In the first the Tamils refused and the Tigers went away. In the second, a Tamil who refused was gunned down when the Tigers opened fire. These and other testimonies make it clear that the Tamils want their alleged leaders to stop killing Muslims. It reveals an irony that while many well placed people around the world, including leading churchmen, treat the Tigers as the sole representatives of the Tamil people, an important segment of the Tamils have given clear indications of their disapproval. Leaders must be seen to arguably, if not demonstrably, represent the interests of the people concerned, holding out some prospect of a human existence. What results from international concern of this kind is clearly a disservice to the Tamils.

The opening of the Eastern University was a boon to Eastern Tamils as well as Muslims, long handicapped in education. Recent developments have threatened the basis as well as the development of the university. Some dons recently asked the Tigers for an assurance of security for Muslims students attending the Vantharumoolai (Batticaloa) campus. They were told that they (the LTTE) had no objection, but that some incident may take place and things may get out of hand. Incidents there are, such as bombs viciously planted in Muslim areas. Boxed into small villages, deprived of means of livelihood and employment and subject to unforeseen and vicious attacks, the Muslims have become a hunted people. It is hardly surprising that Muslim areas have become seedbeds of resentment and militancy. These developments made both ordinary Muslims and Tamils anxious. Whenever the two communities tried to talk, they often found that they had no control over events. If Muslims could not restrain their lawless elements, the position of the Tamils was even more pitiable. They had no influence over their so-called leaders. In the meantime life in the East becomes increasingly unbearable.

Thus the 'leaders' of the people could survive only by making people powerless and denying them any control over their lives, thanks to the incompetence and brutality of the state. These developments are not accidents or mistakes as some Tamils maintain. Some tried to rationalise earlier attacks on Muslims as mistakes made by second rate, undisciplined Eastern cadre. No doubt, the LTTE is happy with such explanations, as with other 'mistakes' attributed to 'low caste cadre' in Jaffna. The LTTE is not such an organisation. Whenever competent and respected leaders of Eastern origin posed a challenge to the Jaffna leadership, no mistakes were made. Their authority was swiftly neutralised. This was the case with Kadavul who in 1986 opposed the order to massacre members of the 'Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). So with Francis in 1987 who opposed the order to

attack Sinhalese in Batticaloa who were part of the community. They had both maintained that there were hard facts about the multi-ethnic East governing the long term interests of Tamils which could not be ridden over roughshod.

While many Eastern Tamils have a soft corner for the LTTE because of the actions of the state, there is growing universal disapproval of its actions. There is little doubt in the minds of Eastern Tamils that they are being used as a human shield to protect the egos and unsustainable ambitions of demented leaders in Jaffna. To this end many Eastern Tamils face the prospect of being permanent refugees in the land of their birth, thus playing into the hands of Sinhalese chauvinists. The latter, have long connived at displacing Tamils to facilitate colonisation.

How will it end?

There is always the outside chance that the LTTE or the government would have a change of heart and will act with greater wisdom, or that something utterly unpredicted would happen. If not the Tamils face the dismal prospect of long being leaderless and not having their interests voiced rationally or cogently. Much that is lost, particularly lives, will be irrecoverable. There is perhaps a small ray of hope. The legacy of the past that led to a fascist culture and tragedy is being questioned by an increasing number of young articulate Tamils. That politics is not something to be discussed over beer, but is a serious matter involving life and death issues is also being understood. Many young in reaction to the long-drawn tragedy of their community have rejected the traditional notion that professional studies are the highest form of educational attainment. Several with good science backgrounds are turning to a study of the humanities and a serious approach to politics. Moreover, rejecting the notion that life abroad is the done thing for those good enough, they are determined to live in Ceylon. These are good signs. While a sound leadership may be a long time coming, much can be accomplished through broadening the work on human rights. It will distance the Tamil struggle from its atrocious and repellent associations. A broad-based move cannot be derailed as was the aim of the assassins of my friend and colleague, Dr. Rajani Thiranagama. Meanwhile it is to be hoped that the Tamils will soon see an end to the political legacy.

To be clear, in the course of realising a just order, the Sri Lankan state's historic predilection for brutality and insensitivity, that was ultimately responsible for this tragedy must be challenged and exposed. In doing this, in effect for all the people of this country, a liberation struggle must uphold higher values and must be responsible by all concerned. A struggle that is so bankrupt and relies only on its capacity to destroy, degrades everything around, allows no point of reference, and legitimises in the end an incomparably more repressive state. The people are sold into misery and servility.

Tamil Refugees in Sri Lanka and the West

by Rajan Hoole

During the course of the conflict that followed the anti-Tamil violence of July 1983, in which the role of the state received wide publicity, about half the Tamil population of two million in the North-East are now estimated to have become refugees. Apart from deep rooted internal factors that

fuelled the conflict, economic factors intimately linked to Western domination are also important. In pushing through economic programmes dictated by the West and the World Bank, traditional democratic freedoms and the freedom of labour to organise were sharply eroded between 1977-82.

Britain, and more indirectly the US, were among those who helped the government to prosecute what was a disreputable war.

Most of the refugees were internal. Following the war of June 1990 half the Tamil population of Amparai and Batticaloa Districts became refugees. Nearly all of them remain within their districts. Most of the Tamils in the rural parts of Trincomalee, Vanni and Mannar Districts became refugees once more. A large part of them went northwards to Jaffna or to India. It is a small fraction of the refugees, predominantly from Jaffna, who have gone to western countries, that have aroused ire and disparaging comment in the West. This is a complex problem which needs to be tackled with understanding. Sadly even statesmen from Britain, the former colonial power, have been given to insensitive and ignorant remarks on the subject. The West is used to prominent dissidents walking into embassies and asking for asylum - something that makes those in the West feel good. But, such is the refusal to understand in the West, that ordinary persons whose lives are under very real threat, have to lie and pay heavily to get to safety. When the LTTE and the government were close to each other between April 1988 to June 1990 and the Indian forces controlled the North-East, many Tamils with former militant connections, particularly deserters from pro-Indian militant groups, were in the position of being unsafe whether in Sri Lanka or India. Several of them disappeared in Colombo before complicated and expensive arrangements to leave the country could be completed.

The usual excuse given by Western officials is that these deserving cases suffer because so many others abuse the system. That is too simplistic a view. If there was a more open attitude on the part of immigration officials, and a person was confident that telling the truth would receive a sympathetic hearing, life on both sides would have been easier. I have had some very unpleasant encounters with Canadian and British officials where I was spoken to as if I were a liar and a criminal. I had only wanted a regular visitors visa. Young persons in danger with faltering English can hardly be expected to fare better. The fault does not lie with individual immigration officers. But it requires political will to understand, what is after all, a problem affecting a large number of Western and third world countries together with millions of people, and seek a more rational and humane approach. It means rather than individual countries taking ad hoc measures involving some embarrassing scenes, there must be a will to understand and politically take some responsibility for the well-being of people in countries where the refugees originate.

Before the exodus

As the Sri Lankan's terms of trade declined sharply during the 70s, professionals found that they could not meet their material aspirations. Many of them decided to emigrate permanently the normal way. Following the experience of July 1983, a large number of Tamil professionals thought seriously for the first time of leaving the country. Such persons had no difficulty in going the normal way, either on their own steam or sponsored by a relative. The controversy does not lie with them.

The controversy lies with a much larger number from a lower economic stratum, who in the normal course of events would not have thought of emigration. They were young persons with a reasonably high level of education. True, the declining economic position of the country hit them seriously. One was growing unemployment. The other was that by the mid 70s even the capacity to build or acquire a decent house went beyond the ability of a local wage earner. Brothers had to shoulder the responsibility of getting a sister married, and

a woman to be given in marriage required at least a dowry house in her name. Fortunately, high oil prices and employment opportunities in the Middle-East came to the rescue. Many young men went as craftsmen, technicians and labourers, and with their earnings fulfilled expectations at home. They mostly returned home after one or two contracts as planned. Several of them successfully invested their savings in workshops, agriculture and other ventures at home, and were economically stable. The change came with July 1983.

July 1983- mid 1986

Following the violence of July 1983, there was a large exodus of Tamils from the South into the North-East. Jaffna itself had a huge refugee population. Jaffna had limited space, was industrially undeveloped and scope for adequate employment was limited. Employment or economic activity in Colombo at that time was a frightening prospect. For the first time people became dependent on family members in the Middle-East and elsewhere for money to buy food.

For the thousands of young Tamils working in the Middle-East and the Far-East, the prospect of going home looked very dim. They received frantic letters from home asking them not to come at any cost. The fear was real. I, then working abroad, remember visiting Sri Lanka against the advice of friends in October 1983. Feeling anxious myself, I asked Sinhalese friends to meet me at the airport. It was hard to imagine a Tamil labourer from the Middle-East with no friends in Colombo arriving at the airport. Moreover a worker in the Middle-East was obliged to leave on expiry of contract, usually about two years.

It was at this time that France, Germany and Switzerland became prominent destinations for Tamils leaving the Middle-East. Some made it to Canada by circuitous routes. We are not talking here about a number of persons from a different social category who were abroad in 1983, and whose minds were already set on settling, in the West. They used the violence at home to choose an advantageous country of domicile. Those going to countries in mainland Europe not then regard them as permanent homes. It was either to keep going until things cooled down in Ceylon, or to go eventually to an English speaking country. This was also the time oil revenues were falling and employment in the Middle-East ceased to be attractive. Once European countries became established as places where employment could be found, these became alternatives to the Middle-East for the much hard pressed youth in Jaffna. Again there was no intention of permanent settlement. The cost of going to Germany in 1984 was a modest Rs 15.000 (US\$ 500). To Britain it was considerably higher.

Political Refugees: The Beginnings

This period also marked the beginning of youth seeking refuge for political reasons. With militant groups based in India and promoted by its agencies, dissent became a costly matter. Torture and internal killings became rife in the 'Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), 'Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam' (LTTE) and 'Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation' (TELO). A person leaving a group faced several risks. Mano Master, a prominent TELO dissident, returned to Jaffna in 1984. The LTTE which took a long term view of things, marked him as a potential nuisance and using the fact that he no longer had the protection of the TELO, killed him. Some other TELO dissidents who returned to Jaffna, distributed protest leaflets. Kittu, then Jaffna leader (he died in January 1993, see also: 'Südasien', Kurzinformationen 1-2/93), came up to the leafleters and thrust the barrel of his pistol into the ear of the dissident who

told me this story. The latter now lives in Canada.

In early 1985-90 dissidents from the PLOTE calling themselves the 'Sparks Group' returned to Jaffna and published the PLOTE's internal killings in a book. They were then persecuted by the PLOTE. Those from the 'Sparks' who did not eventually go abroad are now either in the LTTE's prisons or are hunted by the LTTE.

A new situation arose from May 1986 with the LTTE launching murderous attacks on rival groups to gain sole dominance. Hundreds of TELO cadre were shot and burnt at street junctions in Jaffna. A new mood of disillusionment descended on Jaffna. Several of the survivors with no means went to India, to be kept in camps until taken back to Ceylon for the use of the IPKF. A considerable section, disillusioned with the liberation struggle and having either connections or funds, left for the West. They had no other option.

Another category who started going West in considerable numbers were mature persons who left the LTTE. These were often persons who began to have doubts about the group from the mid 80s. These doubts were increased with the group's killing of TELO cadre. The LTTE leadership thought it wise to let them go. Those remaining at home were under constant suspicion. Several were advised to leave by the LTTE itself. It was from about this time that the LTTE started recruiting the young, later coming down to children.

June 1986 -1987 end

The same pattern followed as the LTTE cracked down on the militant group 'Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front' (EPRLF) in December 1986 and on student dissent in the University of Jaffna and in high schools. Even though several leading members of the EPRLF, unlike the TELO, had a political vision, this dramatic development further widened divisions, and the EPRLF folded up as a political entity. Several members escaped to the South or to India and went to the West. Many nursed their wounds in India and returned with the IPKF. Several ended up in LTTE prisons and many junior cadre like their TELO counter-parts were released. Others met with gruesome ends. Over 50 prisoners died in a single prison massacre in March 1987, in the LTTE's Brown Road camp in Jaffna.

Of the students who were marked during this time, one leader, Vimalaswaran, was killed by the LTTE in July 1988. Several others went abroad. I can off hand think of two living in France and several elsewhere, one having had the distinction of escaping from an LTTE prison.

When the Sri Lankan forces launched Operation Liberation in May 1987 in the Vadamaratchi sector of Jaffna, several hundred young were summarily killed. Two thousand or more were transferred to a prison camp in the South. Jaffna had witnessed several massacres before, mainly between July 1983 - May 1985. But there was also then an optimism that peace with dignity would soon be concluded. It was in this frame of mind that thousands had joined militant groups to fight the Sri Lankan forces, and relatively few civilians thought of quitting.

What the LTTE's bloody internal repression of 1986, and then the devastating Operation Pawan by the IPKF in October 1987 brought home to many was that, the callous character of the state powers, in combination with the internal compulsions of the LTTE's politics, did not portend peace. Apart from demoralisation of the populace, pressing security and economic needs, spurred families to get young males out of the country.

The Exodus - Internal Aspects

It has been mentioned that the biggest single cause of

refugees until August 1987 had been the military action of the Sri Lankan forces. A large number of villages, particularly in the Trincomalee District, were destroyed. In Jaffna itself constant bombing and shelling destroyed hundreds of houses and large areas became ghost habitations. The overwhelming majority of those displaced were internal refugees, and a significant section went to India. Rural youth, particularly from the East, generally lacking means of escape and whose families faced the brunt of the Sri Lankan army's brutality, joined militant groups in large numbers. Their families in turn, often, lived in refugee camps under very poor conditions. Insecurity, death and deprivation became a part of life that they were forced to come to terms with. A veil was thrown over their existence, and they were incapable of making anyone from Colombo to the West sit up and take notice.

The Tamil refugee problem, as far as the West was concerned was to do with a much smaller section with some access to resources or, ties of kin or friendship in the West. They responded to a situation fraught with danger and hopelessness as was best within their means, as did refugees through the ages. A powerful consideration governing their response, which atomised humanity in the West would find strange, is that it was most often the considered response of a family, rather than of an individual.

The LTTE was aware of the disillusionment and questioning that accompanied its blood stained ascent to become the 'sole representatives of the Tamil speaking people'.

The first thing it did after the massacre of TELO militants in May 1986 was to warn against any 'discussion or analysis of the event' through mobile loud speakers. Had the option to leave the land not been available, demoralisation and a worsening economic and military situation (as happened) threatened to politicise Jaffna folk, particularly the middle class, who were both educated and articulate. The LTTE almost consciously operated the safety valve of emigration and institutionalised it to its own benefit.

Thus during the latter half of 1986 the LTTE supervised newspapers in Jaffna marked a confluence of incongruous messages. On the one hand were speeches of hyper-patriotism and pictures of long queues filing past corpses of Sri Lankan soldiers on exhibition. On the other were benevolent advertisements from travel agents offering novel one way tours, with claims of protection from sundry deities. Families pawned or sold their lands and last jewels to send a male brother or child out of the country. Apart from guaranteeing greater security, once debts were paid off, remittances from refugees in the West helped families to repair damaged houses, and maintain a frugal level of nutrition.

The system worked well for the Tigers in the short term. Unlike the refugees who had been part of the freedom struggle, the other refugees were largely unpoliticised. In preventing a backlash to the repression and hopelessness characterising Tiger politics, this exodus worked well. The LTTE further received an income in the form of cuts from the travel agents and collections in Europe. Those unpoliticised upon leaving were even more likely to remain so. Their indebtedness and the constant threat of deportation, gave the more perverse and thoughtless of them a vested interest in the continuance of the war and hence in the LTTE. Playing on their fears and sensibilities the Tigers politicised many of the refugees in the West at the lowest possible level - the level of their expatriate supporters among the elite. A network was established to keep these refugees supplied with videos of events such as exhibitions of SL army corpses and weapons, Tiger functions and speeches, and scenes of massacres by SL forces, where the LTTE's role was by no means creditable. The LTTE thus carved out for itself the role of a martinet

among these refugees and instituted useful financial arrangements.

This covers a section of the refugees who were victims of political circumstances, but whose primary motivations were not political. Tamils going to continental Europe in the 70s were a trickle. But the links established opened the possibility of larger numbers seeking refuge there after July 1983. By so linking its politics to the exodus, the Tigers were able to obviate the necessity that would have arisen for a mass politics that addressed basic issues of human existence. These would have involved protection of life, education and mobilising the human potential so as to safeguard the present and future of the people during a struggle. While those old enough to see that things had gone seriously amiss emigrated, the Tigers began recruiting the very young. What resulted was a politics of death rather than of life.

Those who raised questions of democracy and survival at home were thus isolated and marginalised. Without the prospect of mass mobilisation, they could be dealt with easily. The Tigers were thus able to cover up with patriotic glitter, what increasingly became a politics of torture, imprisonment and hit lists. The exodus played a crucial role in giving the Tigers this flexibility.

August 1987 - June 1990

Following the Indo-Lanka Accord of July 1987, the Sri Lankan government released thousands of Tamil militants and militant suspects it had been holding under PTA. A number of them had gone to prison believing in the struggle and came out disillusioned by the intervening internecine strife. With the onset of the war between the LTTE and the IPKF, nearly all of them were placed in a position of immense danger. Few had any stomach to carry arms. The militant groups with the IPKF started looking for persons with past associations with non - LTTE groups. Some of them were told by Indian officers in menacing tones, 'You either work for us, or you are against us'. The LTTE for its part left behind maniacal killers like Lollo to finish off anyone remotely suspected of links with the IPKF. Also targeted or threatened were persons whose active social concern for a desperate populace tended to diminish the LTTE's hold over the people. Another significant category in danger consisted of those who had left the LTTE before the IPKF arrived. Several of them were killed by pro IPKF groups. The same fate overtook several of those taken in as LTTE suspects by the IPKF and later released. India had long ceased to be a safe place. From early 1988 there was a very large exodus of persons in these categories reaching Europe and Canada, in addition to those leaving for other pressing reasons.

June 1990 - Present

The beginning of the war was marked by the LTTE killing several hundred surrendered Muslim and Sinhalese policemen and the Sri Lankan forces killing thousands of Tamil civilians in reprisals. Hundreds more were conducted away from refugee camps in places as widespread as the Eastern University, Nilaveli, Mutur and Veeramunai by government forces. Although literally hundreds of witnesses testify to this, the government continues to deny responsibility. The only indications suggest that most of them had been killed. From the pre July 1987 to the present war, the ratio of number of prisoners held to the number of those eliminated took a sharp plunge. Jaffna was once more subject to bombing and shelling.

As the result, Tamil people in general lost all faith in the return of peace. As to the government, they became totally alienated and dreaded its forces. In the case of the LTTE any

illusions about its benevolent intentions vanished, its actions were viewed with greater cynicism and its repression was greatly feared. Understanding that there was much public disquiet and questioning about the war, the LTTE made no bones about where the people stood. Shortly after June 1990, the LTTE's deputy leader Mahattaya declared that all persons and belongings on the soil of Tamil Eelam were the property of their struggle. To stem the heightened exodus from Jaffna, a stringent visa system was established for the first time.

Once more the Tigers took care to pacify the elites, particularly if they could perform some service to legitimise the Tigers. Some of them made speeches extolling and encouraging the very young who served the Tigers, while obtaining visas to send their own children to Colombo and the West. Others bided their time, making contacts in the LTTE by doing them favours and then fled after working out a visa.

Meanwhile, fearing any call for accountability, the LTTE cracked down even on independent initiatives by students and other groups to mobilise towards caring for the large number of refugees flooding into Jaffna. Several of them who wanted to be of service were frustrated and harassed into fleeing Jaffna. The LTTE's political prisoners climbed to a number around 4.000. Many of them had no previous militant involvement.

This new exodus was prompted by a total loss of hope in any prospect of a settled life without a high probability of sudden death. Colombo was only nominally safe with chances of employment almost nil. In the course of security operations in Colombo, there was regular harassment of Tamils and the occasional disappearance. To survive in Colombo until foreign travel could be arranged was in addition an expensive affair, affordable mainly to those with foreign contacts. The whole operation was most often financed from abroad through outright grants, loans, or through some special arrangement with a known agent enabling payment later by instalments.

A new category of persons joining the refugee exodus abroad were businessmen fleeing extortionate demands by the LTTE. A typical person in this category, now in London, was a dealer in metal goods, in Jaffna. Through contacts within the LTTE he discovered that a huge sum of money was to be demanded of him. With the help of his friends to obtain travel clearance, he fled to Colombo abandoning his shop. In the course of trying to set up shop in Colombo he was picked up by the police on suspicion with Rs 85.000 (US \$ 2.000) in hand. This was shortly after the Joint Operation Command (JOC) bomb explosion in June 1991. He got himself released by going through a lawyer and paying Rs 20.000 to an inspector of police. Subsequently policemen called on him regularly. This finally led him to contact an agent and go to London. He took this decision which he had not contemplated earlier, because life whether in the North or in the South of Sri Lanka became impossible for him. He was a trader who could only trade and was competent at that. The choices for him were to either go abroad, or to give away what remained of his money and beg. He said that had he the money demanded by the Tigers, he could have brought his entire family to London. A number of businessmen have been abducted and held by the Tigers since 1989, pending payment of large sums of money.

New Ramifications of the Continued Conflict and the exodus

The cost of living whether in Jaffna, or to rent accommodation and live in the relative safety of Colombo, have become so expensive that nearly every family depends at least on partial support from abroad. This means that a significant proportion of refugees and semi-refugees at home

depend on refugees in the West. A small family in Jaffna requires a minimum of Rs 4.000 a month for food alone (we are not talking in terms of food that is even remotely adequate nutritionally by Western standards). A graduate school teacher earns a bare Rs 2.700 a month. Food prices in Jaffna vary sharply and are normally two to any number of times what they are in the South.

A combination of events has driven Jaffna folk to a point where they are forced to live in Sri Lanka at tourist rates. The availability of foreign funds has jacked up various incidental costs and the people, however much they resent it, are locked into it.

This money provides the spur for those thrown out of work to undertake the risky business of transporting food and fuel into Jaffna, and providing transport services for those going South. It provides the means to pay the huge cuts on trade and transport, visa fees charged by the Tigers and bribes to army and police personnel. In the South it helps to fund the huge costs involved in releasing people picked up by the police, and lawyers fees.

In the case of an innocent young lady picked up by the police in Colombo, held for one and a half years, and almost certain to be released by the courts, she had to come up with lawyers fees of Rs 100.000 (US \$ 2.500) - an impossible sum by local standards. In the meantime her family had suffered grievously, her husband having committed suicide. Her family could find this money only because of a brother who is a refugee in Switzerland. People's expenses now bear no relation to their local earning power, thus locking them into the refugee phenomenon.

The exodus meant that a high proportion of women at home were un-married. When men went in the mid-80s, they never dreamed of permanent stay in the West. But their own plight and that of their family made them stay on. The women in turn were forced to go West once marriages were arranged. This has led to children being born and organised Tamil communities coming up in the West.

The response of Western authorities has pushed up the cost and complexity of the exodus. This means a high level of organisation and sophisticated business deals. There is now little question of the costs being raised locally. This means guarantees by well wishers, payment by instalments, insurance against deportation all of which become part of the enterprise. These contracts are operated on trust and are non-enforceable in a court of law. Thus deterrents put up by Western authorities do not necessarily keep out those who have links with this community through personal contacts. The costs involved would make it more difficult for Eastern Tamils lacking contacts. Those outside the circles trying to deal with agents with a view to going abroad face a high risk of being swindled.

The need for funds from relatives in the West would remain long after the conflict is ended. Many have lost their homes and if the past is anything to go by, rehabilitation schemes, although repeatedly promised, never took off. From 1987 people have been repeatedly encouraged to file for claims. Even then the amounts contemplated were paltry in relation to the cost of rebuilding or repair. In a typical case, a house in Urumpirai was bombed in 1987. The cost of repair was well over Rs 100.000. What a newly graduated son could earn in Colombo was barely Rs 3.000 a month. The parents borrowed money and sent the son to England.

Instinctive Reactions

Western governments often try to deal with this exodus without trying to understand its complexity. Stereotyped phrases such as 'economic refugees' and the associated emotions usually lead to disastrous measures being applied. To

start with, a significant proportion a political refugees face real danger at home. The others are not economic refugees in the sense that they wanted to graduate from an old Raleigh bicycle to Jaguar or a Mitsubishi, or from a cottage in Chulipuram to a flat in Chelsea. Nearly every refugee I have come across denies himself the pleasures of the West and sends his last penny home. We are still very much a family centred people where social and cultural expectations play a key role. The money helps many at home to stave off starvation. In a world that has denied them any positive role in protecting the interests of their community, sending money home gives them a means of feeling human and retaining some semblance of honour.

The instinctive reaction of governments is to take a narrowly legalistic view, refuse to understand the problem, and deport them. What results is often ugly and only worsens the problem. In order to make it look good and to minimise the bad publicity at home and abroad, governments try to get one or more international organisations involved. Meaningless statements are made such as 'though the North-East is unsafe, the refugees can live in the South'. An international organisation was recently pressurised into lending its name to a proposed deportation from a European country. The international organisation was in turn looking for others to share the liabilities. At one point it had plans to meet the LTTE representative in Paris, another European capital, to minimise friction that could affect its work. But when asked, it had no plans to ask its representative in Colombo to receive the deportees and signal to the Sri Lankan government that it had an interest in their well being. Whatever the end result, the politics of such operations take little account of the well-being of the people concerned. They rather pander to the insensitivity of governments and reinforce the LTTE's shadowy role over a whole people. Moreover to so use international organisations which try to breathe a little sanity into an insane world order, is to subject them to disrepute and the whole world would lose by it.

Then what would be the plight of a deportee once dumped in Sri Lanka? To start with, they would have no guarantee of security such as Westerners would find acceptable for themselves. Picking up people from refugee camps has continued. There have even been cases of refugees disappearing after they were returned from India under the aegis of UNHCR. When officials of the state contemplating deportations maintain that the security situation has improved, the fact that refugees abducted from camps by government forces in public view have disappeared, and the matter remains swept under the carpet, is conveniently ignored. That disappearance is improbable is not the issue.

More importantly, the person deported would be a heavily indebted, humiliated person without the ability to help himself or his family. This gnawing sense of failure would either destroy the person through suicide or drive him to greater desperation that could work no good. The only human and dignified solution to the problem needs to be radically different.

Some Cautionary Notes:

What follows summarises some points that are already implicit in the foregoing.

1. To treat refugees as unwelcome law breakers or free loaders would only strengthen attitudes on both sides that work towards making the problem insoluble. The reasons for their being refugees have complex ramifications and are, humanly speaking, genuine. An unsympathetic narrow legalism on the part of officials is often reciprocated by answers tailored to fit these legalities. The result is cynicism and a lack of dialogue.

In spite of much cynicism about the LTTE among Western officials, facing a vacuum arising from a lack of dialogue with the refugees, there is a strong temptation to cultivate and use the LTTE as a handle to deal with the refugees. It in effect becomes somewhat like putting the wolf in charge of the sheep pen.

2. In the absence of a dialogue the refugees live in constant fear of deportation whenever a cosmetic temporary peace is secured. This leads to unhealthy attitudes. People instinctively distrust a peace that is not accompanied by a politics of peace as past experience vindicates. To keep such a fear alive is not only unreasonable, but also strengthens the LTTE's hold over them.

3. The generally unsympathetic attitude towards refugees distorts real issues while dwelling on inanities. We occasionally hear of Western officials visiting Ceylon and exclaiming 'Eureka' after finding holes in the stories of a couple of refugee claimants. This in turn leads to stereotyping.

The reality is that hardly any of the many students from the University of Jaffna who had political involvements and fled to the West in real fear of their lives, did so by going to a Western embassy and saying, 'Listen, I have a problem'. This reality received confirmation from my own experience and that of others known to me. A colleague and I were talking to a very high ranking official in the Canadian High Commission in Colombo. We raised two matters. One was that of two of our graduates who had obtained assistantships to follow research programmes in Canadian universities. They had been denied visas after six months of being treated to misleading statements, delays and finally to outright rudeness. The other was that of a student facing danger. The official told us that 'because many abuse the system, the innocent must suffer'. The logic was not dissimilar to that of an army justifying its massacre of civilians after a guerilla attack. A letter of complaint written to the Canadian High Commissioner received no reply. It is against attitudes making ordinary people powerless that an ugly situation has built up.

Take the trader referred to earlier. His story is hardly romantic, heroic or pathetic. His reasons for being a refugee are genuine, but wouldn't receive a sympathetic hearing.

4. It is a mistake to make decisions on the assumption that Tamil refugees have no wish to return. Particularly those who had a political commitment would mostly like to return, if there is a healthy political environment at home where their contribution would be recognised and they could live in dignity. This will not happen as long as attitudes of states empower only the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.

5. When people do return, apart from security, they must also have assurances of financial solvency to ensure that life with dignity is possible. A person must be able to fulfil basic social obligations. No amount of money pledged to the rehabilitation ministry, the provincial government or to other large organisations will convince a person whose house was destroyed that help is on the way. Experience has made people very distrustful in a culture where accountability has been on the decline. A person would by far place his bets on a son in the West to have his house rebuilt. There is thus a real need to make money more directly accessible to people.

6. When dealing with Tamil refugees, it must be kept in mind that it is not an individual one is dealing with, who could be dumped in Colombo and forgotten. Almost every individual refugee represents a community of interests depending on him to meet basic needs, stretching through Colombo to Jaffna.

A recapitulation of causes

Once more to get things in perspective, the internal as well

as the external refugee problem up to mid 1986 was largely due to the actions of the Sri Lankan state. The Tamils left in Ceylon at this time were either those committed to the struggle, who believed that peace would soon return, or like the rural refugees and those who went to India, lacked the means to go very far.

From this time to the present, internal refugees continued to multiply by the hundreds of thousands because of massacres and actions of state forces. These actions contributed to a steady stream of refugees going West, in much smaller numbers in relation to the rising internal problem, as homes and livelihoods were destroyed. But the external refugees exodus became more complex, acquiring a critical internal dimension. Except for a small handful, the exodus of the large number of young and students with a political commitment to the liberation struggle was a direct consequence of internal developments. It must be remembered that a liberation struggle involves a high level of politicisation. The Tigers' hold on power necessarily demanded depoliticisation, and depended rather on sensationalism and terror.

Once the politics became debased, almost every aspirant for power used terror. The LTTE may have gained the initiative and made a fine art of it. But particularly during the IPKF presence, everyone with a real or imagined link with one party was in danger from the other. The need to flee for many was very real.

The role of the Sri Lankan state in the sufferings of by far the huge, destitute and almost forgotten internal refugee problem should not be lost sight of.

Approaching the Problem Creatively

The foregoing, perhaps, suggests courses of action that could be adopted in practice, would gain the approval of host countries and would also go some way towards creating conditions for a VOLUNTARY return of refugees. As much as one may wish, ideal conditions for their return would not arise in a few months or two years. These suggestions if developed may also pave the way for a dialogue on the issues which is frank, sympathetic and respects truth rather than desultory legalities.

1. The dialogue should in the first instance involve the section of refugees who had a political commitment to the struggle. Many of them still show an active concern through several excellent journals appearing in Tamil. They are the ones most likely to wish to return even if conditions are not ideal. Provided they have an opportunity to contribute towards the general social and material upliftment of the community, rather than live as zombies, returning home would be a fulfilment of the aims that fired their youth.

This dialogue, if accompanied by political will, could even evolve a time frame to work towards a solution. There must be parallel moves to bring the government and the Tigers to show tangible good faith in creating a benign political and human rights environment where a return of exiles is feasible.

2. On the part of the Sri Lankan government, there must be a political initiative to give confidence to the Tamils. To tackle disabilities faced by civilians because of the actions of the forces in isolation can only bring limited results. For missing example, while security measures in Colombo extortion of Tamils, is very much a consequence of the lack of political direction. Without a political initiative, the security enterprise will be about as open and confused as the economy.

The practical problems involved in governments having a dialogue with refugee representatives can be bridged by using NGOs more effectively.

For anyone to say that conditions are right for the return of

refugees is meaningless unless the security and well-being of internal refugees is assured. To start with, the government must be made to account for those hundreds of refugees abducted by the forces in public view, for which responsibility was later denied. To talk of peace in the country would have no meaning if there could be peace one day and people disappear the next when the government forces have a quarrel with a rebel group, especially one with whom they were as thick as thieves.

3. The Tigers must be challenged to demonstrate that they respect dissent and that people could contribute to the well-being of their community without interference and as their conscience allows. To start with they must be made to account for the 4.000 or so political prisoners they hold. If those who are committed to the well-being of the community and actively cared for it can be tortured, killed or imprisoned by its so called representatives, the community has no future. The refugees would do well to stay where they are. The ability of those politically committed refugees to return and the early release of the LTTE's prisoners, will crucially determine the prospects for a politics of peace and a general return of refugees.

4. With these measures, rather than keeping refugees idle, they should be encouraged to acquire skills geared to the eventual rehabilitation of the whole community at home. These skills could be technical, psychiatric nursing, providing a future for the war-maimed and the founding and running of co-operative enterprises.

As mentioned earlier, apart from the security and political aspects of the return of refugees, the economic one is also a key to the whole process. The government, central or provincial, and large institutions probably cannot handle this and the people's past experience will hardly give them confidence in these institutions. Money must be much more within the reach of people. The host countries in the West could involve committed and appropriately trained returning refugees as a means of directing relief in a decentralised manner. This is just the germ of an idea whose working out would be more involved. Those who remained at home should not be made to feel powerless.

5. If those who were once politically committed had established themselves at home, and conditions are seen to have improved, then many other refugees will wish to return voluntarily. Although material advantages in the West could be habit forming, most of those from rural backgrounds who came to the West feel more keenly the loss of emotional security which the easy going communal life at home gave them. What they mainly ask for is a life with dignity and without want. If the problem is approached sympathetically and with understanding, without making the refugees feel threatened, I strongly believe that it could be resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned.

(The author is a member of the organisation 'University Teachers for Human Rights', Jaffna)

Tamil Refugees in Canada

- A new form of authoritarianism -

Small groups of Tamils, often young and mostly males, gather weeknights and Saturdays at the Danforth Avenue office of the 'Tamil Eelam Society of Canada', located in Toronto, where they are learning to work with computers. Several courses offered by this Society are intended to make Tamils more competitive in the labour market, hit severely by the ongoing recession. Not far from there, down the Eaton Avenue, the office of the 'World Tamil Movement' (WTM) is located.

These are the two major community organisations that are widely recognized as representative organisations of the Tamil community in Canada by the Federal and Provincial Governments. There are about 70.000 Tamils in Canada, most of them live in Metropolitan Toronto area. The number may be even higher.

Before 1985, the number of Tamils who lived in Canada was less than a couple of hundreds. Between 1985 and 1992 the Tamil population in Canada has grown to unprecedented levels. The 'Statistics Canada' - the official Canadian Agency for statistics, census and other related issues - reported in 1992 that the Tamils belong to one of the fastest growing communities in Canada. The growth rate was put at a staggering 836 percent.

Except for a handful, all Tamils who enter Canada, often paying atrocious amounts to various 'human transport agen-

cies' (up to US-Dollar 10.-12.000), claim refugee status. The acceptance rate is also extremely high. According to the 'Convention Refugee Determination Division of Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada', between January 1, 1992 and Dezember 31, 1992 out of 5.742 claims, 5.729 were accepted by the authorities. This is 99,8 percent acceptance rate. Among the top twenty-five source countries that 'provide' Canada with refugees Sri Lanka ranks as first. Srilankan Tamils easily outnumber the Somalians, Russians, Haitians and Lebanese.

More than 30 percent of the Tamils who have recently found safe havens in Canada are professionals - accountants, teachers, engineers, civil servants etc. But in Canada, they are dish-washers and security guards. Doctors are door-to-door cleaners and salesmen. Educators pump gas at filling stations, if not collecting garbage.

Many Tamils have become permanent residents of Canada or 'Tamil-Canadians' as the multi-cultural jargon of Canada would like to have it, adding one more hyphenated identity to the ethnically and racially most diverse city in the world (The UN confirmed the most ethnically diverse city of the world on Toronto recently). Other Tamils have obtained "approval in principal" and are being processed for landed immigrant status.

In the past, three or four years, hundreds of Tamil business