

FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY OF MUSLIM EXPULSION FROM JAFFNA By D.B.S.JEYARAJ

Fifteen years ago on this day (Oct 30th) around 28, 000 men , women and children were expelled from Jaffna by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam organization. They were all Tamil - speaking Muslims living in the Muslim "vattaaram" or zone of Jaffna town. About 500 plus Muslims living in Chavakachcheri had been expelled about a week earlier. Around 150 other Muslims living in other parts of the peninsula were rounded up and sent away in the days that followed. Only the Muslims of Nainatheevu Island or Nagadeepa remained safe due to the Naval protection and benign presence of the Buddhist prelate.

The expulsion of Muslims was not confined to the Jaffna peninsula alone. Muslims from the entire Northern province were expelled by the LTTE. The expulsion process on the Northern mainland began a few days before it commenced in the peninsula and concluded a few days after Jaffna was "cleansed" of Muslims. The bulk of Northern Muslims were living in Mannar comprising 26 % of the district population.

Apart from Jaffna and Mannar the Muslims of Mullaitheevu (4.9%) and Kilinochchi (1.6%) districts were sent out also. The Muslims in Vavuniya (6.9%) were luckier as most of their villages were in the Government controlled areas. Around 55 to 60, 000 Muslims were expelled from the northern mainland by the LTTE. Together with those of the peninsula the Muslims driven out from the Northern Province numbered 80 to 85, 000 in 1990.

The LTTE was particularly cruel in the case of Jaffna Muslims. The Jaffna Muslims were concentrated in two or three densely populated wards of the Jaffna Municipality. Sonaka theru, Ottumadam and Bommaively etc were their areas. They were an integral part of Jaffna society. Though not on the same scale as Tamils they too had built up an educational tradition. Former civil servant and Zahira Principal AMA Azeez, Supreme Court Judge Abdul Cader, Appeal Court Judge MM Jameel. Education Director Munsoor etc being some leading lights of the Jaffna Muslims. There were Municipal Councillors and one MMC Basheer was deputy - mayor and acting mayor of Jaffna.

The Jaffna Muslims like their Tamil counterparts had from time to time vacated their homes during intense shelling or bombing. They had always returned in a few days. With the LTTE assault on the Jaffna Fort camp and stiff resistance being proffered in return, fighting escalated in September 1990. This led to many Muslims leaving Jaffna town for weeks. Many went to Mankumban islet where a Muslim sufi shrine existed. The Jaffna Fort fell on Sep 26th and the LTTE led by Col. Bhanu took over the camp.

The heavy fighting ceased and the Jaffna people including Muslims began to return. People were picking up pieces and trying to resume normal life. Tamil - Muslim hostilities were increasing in the East. The desertion of some Muslim cadres in the LTTE and a few of them going over to the enemy incensed the Eastern LTTE under Karuna (military) and Karikalan (political). Many other Muslim cadres in the LTTE were executed by the leadership. An anti - Muslim spirit pervaded the LTTE.

On the other hand the state also exploited and aggravated these feelings. Many Muslim anti - social elements were inducted as homeguards. These sections collaborated with the security forces in promoting anti - Tamil violence. In some cases Muslim homeguards were responsible for Tamil civilian massacres. Some Tamil hamlets and villages were destroyed by Muslim homeguard led mobs. They were given covert support by sections of the security forces.

The LTTE in turn responded with equally gruesome massacres of Muslim civilians. The Sammanthurai and Kattankudi attacks on Mosques and massacre of civilians at the Saddham Hussein model village of Eravur being notorious examples. Though Tamil - Muslim relations were at a low point in the East the situation was quite different in the North. Both communities continued to co - exist there peacefully. One reason being that Muslims were a small minority posing no threat to the Tamil majority.

This situation of Muslims living peacefully in the North while tensions prevailed in the East was unacceptable to the Eastern tigers. A delegation led by Karikalan came to the North to persuade Pirapakaran that "stern" action should be taken against Muslims. Karikalan apparently wanted a lesson to be taught to the Muslims. Even as this pressure was being exerted on the tiger hierarchy an incident occurred at Chavakachcheri.

Most of the Chavakachcheri Muslims lived on Dutch road. The LTTE while investigating an incident of intra - Muslim violence discovered some swords. According to tiger "explanations" this triggered off an alarm bell. The LTTE conducted a search of Muslim houses and businesses and found about 75 swords concealed in a Muslim shop. This was seen as part of a deadly conspiracy. Even if this explanation is true one cannot see 75 swords being of any use against the Kalashnikovs of the LTTE. The swords were most probably kept as a precautionary measure against community oriented violence.

The shop where the swords were found belonged to a Muslim businessman whose lorries travelled to and from Colombo for trade. The LTTE intelligence known for its excessive paranoia suspected a greater conspiracy. It was suspected that the security - intelligence apparatus could be using Muslim businessmen travelling frequently to Colombo as agents to engage in sabotage or act as spies. Preemptive action was required it was felt.

Once the Chavakachcheri Muslims were ordered to leave the chain reaction started. The tragedy of this expulsion was that the Muslims began fleeing the areas they lived for generations on the orders of an armed movement. There was no protest, no opposition. Such was the terror and power of the LTTE. Besides the Muslims were few in numbers. Let us not forget that five years later Tamils too were forced into fleeing Jaffna in large numbers during the engineered exodus of 1995. That was perhaps the greater law of Karma or the principle of Dharma!

According to explanations provided by the LTTE later the presence of an Eastern contingent under Karikalan in the North in October was greatly responsible for the decision of mass expulsion. Essentially it was seen as some form of retaliatory warning to the eastern Muslims. This decision was further influenced by the exaggerated threat perception. In a blatantly racist mindset the Muslims were seen as potential fifth columnists. It was against this backdrop that the expelling exercise took place.

The proces began in Chavakachcheri and spread to the mainland. The Muslim people of Kilinochchi, Mullaitheevu and Mannar districts were now being driven out. Even as this terrible development was taking place the Jaffna Muslims were unperturbed. They could not see any danger befalling them. These were things happening to others for different reasons. Jaffna Muslims saw themselves as integral to Jaffna. Nothing could happen to them from their Tamil brethren. Like some Jewish people during the Hitler era they continued with "normal" life unmindful of the brewing disaster.

It appears in retrospect that the LTTE was more harsh on Jaffna Muslims than the others. They were given an incredibly short deadline to leave Jaffna. This may have been due to the LTTE deciding that Jaffna be "cleansed" of Muslims by November. Comparatively the tigers came "last" to the Jaffna Muslims. The LTTE D - Day for them was October 30th.

It was about 11.30 am in the morning that the LTTE vehicles with loudspeakers began plying the roads and lanes of the Jaffna Muslim residential areas. A terse announcement was repeated incessantly that representatives of each Muslim family should assemble at the Jinnah grounds of Osmania College by twelve noon. Armed tigers began patrolling the streets. Some began a house to house announcement in the thickly populated lanes and by - lanes.

The people abandoned whatever they were doing and hurried to the grounds. At 12. 30 pm a senior tiger leader Aanchaneyar addressed them. Aanchaneyar now goes by another name Ilamparithy. Yes! the man was none other than present Jaffna commissar Ilamparithy then in charge of Jaffna town sector politics. Aamnchaneyar or Ilamparithy had a brief message. The LTTE high command for reasons of security (Paathukaappu) had decided that all Muslims should leave Jaffna within two hours. Failure to do so meant punishment. No further explanation was given.

When people started to question him Ilamparithy lost his cool. He barked loudly that the Muslims should simply follow orders or face consequences. He then fired his gun several times in the air. A few of his bodyguards followed suit. The message was clear. The people thought initially that the army was going to invade Jaffna and that the LTTE was asking everyone to leave. Only belatedly did they realise that only the Muslims were ordered to leave.

With more and more armed tigers coming into the area the perturbed Muslims began packing. Initially they were not told of any restrictions on the things they could carry. So people packed clothes, valuables, jewels and money. Buses, vans and lorries were made available for transport by the tigers. Many Muslims made their private transport arrangements too.

The Muslims streaming out of their homes were now given a fresh order. They were asked to queue up at the "Ainthumuchanthi" junction. As the hapless people lined up they were in for a terrible shock. Male and female cadres of the LTTE began demanding that the Muslim people hand over all their money, belongings and jewellery to them. Each person would be allowed only 150 rupees each. Each person would be allowed only one set of clothes.

Feeble protests were raised. The brandishing of sophisticated weapons and threats in aggressive tones quickly silenced them. The suitcases with clothes and other belongings were confiscated. They were opened first and selected clothes taken out. If a person wore trousers an extra set of trouser and shirt was given. If a person

wore a sarong an extra sarong and shirt was given. All the money and documents including national identity cards were confiscated. Women and girls were stripped of jewels. Some women cadres were brutal even pulling out ear studs with blood spurting in the ear lobes. The children were not spared. Not a watch was left. Jaffna Muslims reported later that Karikalan from Batticaloa was supervising the entire operation.

At least 35 wealthy Muslim businessmen were abducted. They were detained by the LTTE. Some Muslim jewellers were tortured for details of hidden gold. One jeweller was killed by the beatings in front of the others. Later huge sums of money were demanded for their release. Some paid up to 3 million. The abducted persons were released in stages over the years. 13 people however never returned and are presumed dead.

After expelling the Jaffna Muslims the LTTE cordoned off the area with ropes. The "Virakesari" of Nov 2nd 1990 reported that this was done to protect the property till the Muslims returned. Some of the dazed Muslims too thought that their expulsion was only temporary. It took months for them to understand the true state of affairs. As time went on some of the once rich now pauperised Muslims found themselves unable to adjust to the new situation. They have declined greatly. Some others who were financially unsound earlier coped with the changed situation better. Many have bettered their prospects amid changed circumstances. Quite a lot of Jaffna Muslims went abroad as refugees.

Most of the Muslims expelled from the North were temporarily re-settled in the Puttalam district. Many found their way to Vavuniya, Negombo and Colombo. Others relocated to the Anuradhapura, Kurunegala, Gampaha, Matale and Kandy districts. The largest concentrations of displaced Muslims from the northern mainland are in Kalpitiya and Pulichakulam areas. The largest concentration of displaced Jaffna peninsula Muslims are in the Thillaiyaddy area of Puttalam.

The Premadasa regime in 1990 was unable to provide protection for these expelled Muslims. They were also not re-settled properly for years. It was only in 1994 when the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress joined the Chandrika Kumaratunga government and its leader MHM Ashraff became Rehabilitation Minister that the situation began to improve. Though some Muslims continue to languish in refugee camps large numbers have moved out and settled down in new habitats. Ashraff's scheme of distributing lands in Puttalam district has enabled many to put down roots in the district.

Meanwhile the LTTE looted almost all possessions left in the Muslim houses. Many houses were stripped of tiles, wooden frames, doors, windows, etc. Much of the looted furniture was sold to Tamils through the LTTE Shops or "Makkal Kadai". Some Muslims returning to the North after the ceasefire recognized their possessions in other houses and businesses. Many Muslim houses and vehicles were sold illegally to Tamils by the LTTE.

The LTTE received negative publicity through this terrible act of mass expulsion. Ideologue Anton Balasingham was to admit later that a blunder had been made. Yet there has been no formal apology by the LTTE. Balasingham also said that tiger supremo Pirapakaran regrets the expulsion. But Pirapakaran has been conspicuously silent on the subject so far.

The ceasefire of Feb 23rd 2002 gave the displaced Muslims an opportunity to visit Jaffna again. They were aghast at what they saw. In the case of many there was happy reunion with Tamil friends. As in the case of the silent majority of the Sinhalese who were helpless to stop the 1983 anti-Tamil violence most Tamils in Jaffna were powerless to stop the Muslim expulsion too.

There has been a stream of Muslims travelling to and from Jaffna after the ceasefire. Some families have returned and the re-opened Osmaniya College now has 60 students on roll. Two Mosques are functioning again. According to a Jaffna Muslim source there is a floating population of about 2000 Muslims in Jaffna at any given time. Around 1500 are Jaffna Muslims while the rest are Muslim traders from other areas. About 10 Muslim shops are functioning.

There was a time when the Jaffna new market built by Mayor Alfred Duraiappah was virtually dominated by Muslims. Two of the three blocks were monopolised by Muslims. The hardware, lorry transport, jewellery and meat trades were dominated by Muslims. That era is now over. Ilamparithy addressed some Muslim businessmen after their return and instructed them to avoid certain businesses. The Muslims are being taxed along with the others. No tax concession is given them to help start a fresh life. Not one cent has been paid as compensation by the LTTE. Ilamparithy did not utter even one word of regret or explanation for the mass expulsion and misappropriation of property.

Under these circumstances many Jaffna Muslims feel insecure. The prospect of another war is not ruled out. They know that they will be victims again at a time of war. The LTTE has not shown any sign of a reformed attitude. The tiger taxation system inhibits all free enterprise. The paranoid security consciousness prevails still.

Besides many Jaffna Muslims have bettered their prospects elsewhere. Despite the initial hardship many have

improved their lot and are better off than their earlier position in Jaffna/ A new generation of children and young adults have no nostalgia for Jaffna and prefer to stay where they are now. Indeed many families have visited Jaffna during the past three years to make an appraisal. The majority have decided not to go back to Jaffna. Incidentally no Jaffna Muslim lives in a refugee camp. This is not so in the case of Northern mainland Muslim refugees.

Under these circumstances many Jaffna Muslims are returning quietly to Jaffna and are selling off their property. The ceasefire is facilitating this process. In this they are like many Jaffna Tamils who have also sold their property. Tamil expatriates may shout for Eelam but have sold property in Jaffna. They and their children enjoy a short stay in the "motherland" but prefer to return "home" elsewhere than stay permanently in the tiger ruled Tamil land. Likewise Jaffna Muslims too prefer not to return to Jaffna. As a Jaffna Muslim said "Earlier we were fishing in a puddle. Now we are fishing in an ocean. We dont want to go back".

This Jaffna Muslim state of mind is not univrsally applicable. Also many Northern mainland Muslims are still languishing. They would like to go back. The situation however is not conducive yet. Displaced Muslims of the North have declared a "week of mourning" to denote the fifteenth anniversary of mass expulsion. A protest demonstration is scheduled in Puttalam on Oct 30th. A mass petition with 100,000 signatures urging speedy resettlement is to be sent to Kumaratunga and the UN.

One of the greatest attributes of some expelled Muslims that I have come across is their lack of visible bitterness with Tamils. They realise that it was the LTTE that was responsible for their predicament and the reasons for it. They do not blame the ordinary Tamil for it. They also retain sympathy for the Tamil plight at the hands of both the state and the LTTE. Above all their fondness for the Tamil language, its literature and media have not decreased. Furthermore they are wistfully nostalgic about Jaffna asserting proudly that the North is their homeland too.

This magnanimity in spite of the injustice meted out to them shames the Tamil community at large. Except for a few voices there has been no powerful outcry against the LTTE for perpetrating this atrocity against the Muslims. A greater and vigorous demand has to be made by the Tamils that all expelled Muslims be resettled in their former homes with full compensation and restoration of property. Above all a sincere and humble mass apology should be extended towards the muslims for the mass expulsion fifteen years ago by the LTTE.

(ENDS)

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