

Struggle of the Church and the Displaced People in Mannar, Sri Lanka

Presently located in areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but in the frontlines of the recent battle fronts, the Madhu Shrine in Mannar, Northern Province, has now become a prized target to claim in the on-going battles between the government and the LTTE.

Local source suggests that the government is determined to capture control of the Madhu Shrine. The capture would serve useful political propaganda, to claim that it had “liberated” the Shrine. Many Sinhalese Catholics, including religious and clergy, ignorant of realities in the North, may believe such propaganda. On the other hand, LTTE would fight hard to prevent the government from claiming “liberation”.

The myth of liberation

The kind of “liberation” proposed by government security force is not what Mannar people would welcome. Such was the fate of the people who were forcefully displaced from Arippu, Silvathura areas, where military and political considerations has taken over humanitarian needs. Despite claims of “liberation” and promises to send them back, these people are still not allowed to go back and are forced to live in refugee camps for more than 7 months after the “liberation”. In addition, people in Mannar live in fear of security forces, as disappearances, killings, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, beatings, harassment including sexual harassment have been rampant for decades and continue to be so.

Nor do Mannar people have confidence in the LTTE’s liberation. People fleeing Vanni, a district in Northern Province in recent times, as well as stories of struggles by people who try to intervene with the LTTE on behalf of the people being harassed are testimony to the claim. The LTTE has a record of abuses, such as forcible recruitment including children, as well as targeting civilians, leading politicians, intellectuals and other dissenting voices.

Mayhem faced by the Church

Blatant attacks on Churches and priests in north Sri Lanka are chilling reminders in the discussion around Madhu Shrine, which experienced several attacks in the past. Some of the examples are:

Thalladi Church: Preceding months to the attack in February 2007, where 6 soldiers were killed by LTTE bombing, St. Sebastian Catholic Church in Thalladi, Mannar was occupied by government security force. Priests and devotees are banned from conducting or joining religious services. Military vehicles and personnel were clearly visible from a distance.

St. Philip Neri Church: St. Philip Neri Church in Allaipiddy village, off the coast of Sri Lanka’s Jaffna Peninsula, was shelled on 13 August 2006, allegedly by the Sri Lankan Army. The attack killed at least 15 people, including an elderly woman and injured as many as 54 others. Victims include displaced people who took refuge in the Church.

Pesalai Church: The attack took place on 17 June 2006 at Our Lady of Heart Church, Pesalai village in Mannar Island. Six civilians were killed and at least 47 were injured in the attack. It is reported that some displaced people fled to India in fear as refugees

after this incident, as they realized that the Church, which they once considered as their last place of refuge, is not immune to attacks.

Disappearances & killings of Tamil priests: Fr. Jim Brown (2006), Fr. Mary Bastian (1985) and Methodist priest Rev. Jeyarajasingham (1984) were allegedly killed by government security forces. Both LTTE and the government exchanged blames for the recent killing of Fr. Pakiaranjith (2007) in September.

Past and Current Effort for Madhu Church

The Catholic Bishops Conference of Sri Lanka, the Bishop and the priests of Diocese of Mannar have been appealing to the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army to refrain from using the area gazetted as the “Madhu Church Reservation” under the “Pilgrimage Ordinance” in 1982 for military and political purposes and to respect its sacred and humanitarian nature.

Rev. Rayappu Joseph, Bishop of Mannar, has repeatedly appealed to the President of Sri Lanka, in writing, as well as in face-to-face meetings to declare the Madhu Shrine area as a “Zone of Peace” through a special gazette notification, in order to ensure that the Shrine can continue to serve as a religious and humanitarian space. The LTTE had indicated to the Bishop that it will accept such a “Zone of Peace”. However, concrete response from the President remains to be seen.

Supporters of the Shrine call on all Catholics, especially those in the south of Sri Lanka who have taken part in devotions at the Madhu Shrine and all people of goodwill, not to accept myths of liberation and other political propaganda by both the government and the LTTE. Instead they are urged to lend their support to the Bishop and people of Mannar in their efforts to preserve Madhu Shrine as a place of worship and humanitarian refuge to future generations.

Sources:

Wikipedia

Madhu Shrine: the struggle to preserve the sanctity of a sacred shrine and humanitarian space

<http://www.groundviews.org/2008/04/07/madhu-shrine-the-struggle-to-preserve-the-sanctity-of-a-sacred-shrine-and-humanitarian-space/>