

TO:
His Eminence Cardinal George Pell
Catholic Archbishop of Sydney
Australian Tamil Broadcasting Corporation
Catholic Association Of Sydney Tamils

18-06-2006

His Excellency the Apostolic Nuncio,
Apostolic Nunciature,
220 Bauddhaloka Mawatha,
Colombo 7.

Your Excellency,

Shedding of innocent blood in St. Mary's Church, Pesalai in the island of Mannar at 8.20 AM on Saturday 17th of June,2006 sent with my kind request to be forwarded to the Holy See, Rome.

Pesalai is a large village that lies to the North-West of the island of Mannar with a population of 8000 people 90% of whom are Catholic Fisher folk and the rest being Hindus and Muslim fisherfolk in the main village of Pesalai and the adjacent villages of Kaataspatri and Siruthoppu. They are a peace loving people. The Sri Lanka Navy which has one of its camps in the Pesalai area on the shores of a little village called Siruthoppu and the sea tigers of the LTTE were engaged in a battle in the sea off Pesalai. Two days before this incident i.e. on the 15th inst., an exchange of fire had taken place between the Police who are stationed at the very entrance of the village of Pesalai and the LTTE, at 8.00 PM. At this incident the people of Pesalai had fled to their Church for shelter. During this incident, six houses and a shop in the village suffered extensive damage due to RPG mortar attack from the Police Post. The people numbering over 6000 spent the whole night in the main Church and in the buildings in the church compound. The same people chose to stay there even on Friday night On the early morning of Saturday the 17th inst., as the people were trying to go to their homes, they were held back by the sound of the battle that had started between the Navy and the LTTE in the Pesalai sea.

As this battle was dying out around 8.00 AM, the people heard heavy firing coming from the side of the Siruthoppu Navy camp and they knew that the Navy was advancing towards the village of Pesalai and towards the Church. On the way, the Navy had set fire to the Cadjan houses of the fishermen at a costal location known as Vankalai Padu and gutted down several of them together with fishing nets, outboard engines and other valuables. This location was deserted by the fishermen who had taken shelter in the Church at Karisal a kilometer away from this their habitation, a towards the interior. The Navy personnel proceeded further towards Pesalai it is related by eye witnesses and on the way they signaled to six fishermen who were returning to the shores at a costal location called Kaataspathri. The fishermen came down from their boats with their Identity Cards in hand. The Navy men asked them to go on their knees and fired at them through the mouths. Four of them fell dead still holding in their hands their Identity cards. The rest of the two had tried to run away and one of them was caught by the Navy and fired through his mouth and his body was found in one of the boats and the other sustained injuries on his stomach and holding his stomach, he ran and fell down at one of the houses at the village and he was immediately taken to the nearby church of Kaataspathri. He was removed by the SLRC to the Mannar hospital after an hour at 9.30 AM and had been sent from Mannar. to Anuradahpura hospital for special treatment.

The Navy personnel proceeded to Pesalai blindly firing around and several houses at Pesalai are seen damaged. They came around the Church of Our Lady of Victory at Pesalai and took positions outside its walls. At this point four men one of whom was in shorts and t-shirt and three in camouflage uniform rushed into the church compound by the main entrance riding on two motor cycles it is said. They started firing at the church walls, doors and windows where over 3000 people, after having fastened all the doors and windows from within, were taking shelter. Some Navy personnel fired into the church through the opening between the main door and the floor and as all the people in the Church were lying down on the floor, many of them sustained injuries. One of the Navy personnel, then had opened one of the windows and hurled one after the other two hand grenades in to the church. One of these fell back striking the window grills and the other blasted in the church with a big noise and heavy smoke resulting in one lady's head being blown off in the church and wounding 47 people, some of whom received serious injuries. Pesalai hospital lies in the adjoining compound of the Church and these four men in the words of the Doctor, entered the hospital

and pointing the gun at the neck of the Doctor and pushed him to the ground scolding him in filth.

I, the Bishop of Mannar when informed about the incident, contacted the area commander of the Sri Lanka Army in Mannar and he advised me not to proceed to Pesalai. After much efforts, the Divisional Secretary and myself were able to send the Mannar Police with the Ambulances to bring the seriously wounded to the Mannar Hospital .Finally at 9.10 A.M., I was able to move towards Pesalai with the SLMM (Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission), SLRC (Sri Lanka Red Cross) and the Divisional Secretary of Mannar. We managed to send the remaining wounded people and also dispatched the six dead bodies to the Mannar Hospital in the SLRC vehicles. In the meantime, the military sources had tried to spread false news stating that there had been an attack by the LTTE on land at Pesalai on the Police and the Navy had to open fire etc. They also had been stating that a grenade held by one of those inside the Church had exploded etc. and that the Security Forces are not responsible for the explosion in the Church. All the people of Pesalai say that there was absolutely no incident on land in their village on that morning and the grenade story as stated by the military sources is adding insult to injury.

I informed the Vice Admiral, the commander in chief of the SL Navy of the above facts as testified by the people of Pesalai and their Parish Priests. I invited the local commander of the Navy and organized a meeting with the people of Pesalai numbering 7000 at 4.30 in the evening of the same day of the incident. These people related to him in the above terms, of the inhuman incident perpetrated by the SL Navy in their village of Pesalai. They cried for their security against the Security Forces. They wanted him not to prevent them from fleeing to India or to go to the LTTE controlled Wannai for their safety. If not they said he could bring all his men and shoot all of them once and for all. Even if a sacred place like a Church is unsafe for them, where else will the innocent civilians find safety? was their question. They pointed out that the incident had taken place in the sea and the people had nothing to do with it and why, they asked this cruel brutality against the innocent people, babies, women and elderly taking refuge in a Church. The Commander accepted everything the people said and tried to placate them by assuring them their future security. The people pointed out that several incidents of this type had taken place in the past and such assurances had been given by the different commanding officers and they all had disappeared as words written on waters.

They spoke of the incident again at Pesalai on the 23rd of December, 2005 where after an incident of a claymore attack on the Navy, the consequent torture of the people of the area by the same Navy personnel, from noon 1.40 to night 9.00 PM and of the four innocent civilians including a three years old child made to disappear in the hands of the navy. Thereafter too assurances were given to no avail. The SLNavy is responsible for this crime and the crime is forgotten with inquiry worthy if its name. The people told him of the threat meted out to all the people in Pesalai and in its sub-villages namely Kaataspathri and Siruthoppu by the Pesalai Navy saying that any LTTE attack on them will result in their wiping out the whole village sparing not even breast feeding infants. In this background, the people could not be convinced of the security. All at the meeting requested the presence of the ICRC in the village on a permanent basis to which the ICRC representative present said that he would keep his headquarters informed of the same and follow their instructions. The people are mortally afraid of the SLNavy and any amount of assurance given to them is not going to change their fear ridden psychosis due to past assurances not being kept up and the threats meted out to them by the Navy. When they sight the Navy moving in groups, the people at Pesalai run for their life to the church.

The SLNavy and the SLArmy, very unrealistically expect that the ordinary civilians should give them information about the presence and plans of the LTTE. They do not see that the civilians have nothing to do with the plans and activities of the LTTE and that their only concern is their daily civic life in search of the daily means of sustaining their large families. The fate of the so called informants is a fright to the innocent people. The security forces in this area do not understand this at all and from top to bottom, each of them has coloured his mind with this fanaticism that the people are there to supply security information to them. If the people do not do this, the Security Forces here think that the people should be killed. Unless and until the above unfounded prejudice is removed from the Forces against the Tamil civilians, they will never be in a position to offer any security to the people. The cry of our people that they be secured from the SL Security forces in their midst is very genuine in the given situation. Their immediate expectation is that a neutral Force should be brought in to take care of the security of the innocent people in a situation where nearly 95% of the Security Forces in Sri Lanka are Singhala and except a few very good officers, almost all of them are prejudiced heavily against the Tamil people. This truth should be

squarely faced by all concerned to prevent violence and counter violence against civilians Tamil or Singhala speaking.

At the moment all fishing in Mannar district is forbidden and the life of the poor fishermen is going to become miserable, many a time left only with plain water and little sugar to feed the infants. The people's right to life and their right to earn a living are greatly endangered in the District of Mannar which has a population of 125,000 people. Today 7000 of Pesalai are staying in the Churches and over 1000 have left the area in search of safer locations.

The Church of Our Lady of Victory at Pesalai is one of the biggest churches in the country which was newly built and blessed by His Excellency Apostolic Nuncio on the 5th of December, 2004. This church has been desecrated by the shedding of innocent blood by unjust aggressors, the SL Navy. I had called for a day of penance and prayer and this day falls on Monday the 19th inst and by evening we will be having a purification ceremony for three hour and bless the Church anew for worship in the presence of the Presbyterium of Mannar and the people of Pesalai. Today we buried the six civilians murdered by the Navy at Pesalai yesterday by shooting them through their mouths blowing off their heads and I spoke of Jesus Christ cruelly crucified and his Eternal words "Father forgive them for they do not know what thy do". It is this power of forgiveness, I said, that made Him rise again and reminded the people of this hope that enlightens us even at this hour of darkness. We are not convinced that any inquiry worthy of its name will be held on these crimes and the culprits be prevented from further savage onslaught on the innocent civilians and those taking refuge in the sanctuary of their religion, the Church.

Details of those killed by the Navy at Siruthoppu Navy camp in Pesalai, Mannar on 17.06.2006:

01. Mrs. Manaval Claramma Leela aged 75 yrs, Catholic, Ward 4, Pesalai killed in the Church.
02. Mr. Jesuthasan Jude Nixon 23 yrs old, Catholic, unmarried; Ward 8, Pesalai.
03. Mr. Cyrilappar St. Jude 22 yrs old Vidathalthivu; Catholic, Unmarried.
04. Mr. Turairaja Vijekumar 39 yrs old, Hindu, married with three children of 16,13, and 10 years of age, Kaattaspathiri, Pesalai.
05. Kodalingham Linganathan 20 yrs old, Hindu, unmaried, Kaattaspathri, Pesalai.

06. Abdul Raheem Latheep, 28 yrs old, Muslim, married with wife and four children all under nine years of age, Puthukudiiruppu, Erukilampiddy.

In the broader perspective of the very explosive situation in the country, our deeply felt and earnestly expressed expectations expressed in the name of peace and in the name of the innocent civilians who are increasingly getting killed and in the name of us all who are living in utter fear, tension, helplessness and uncertainty in this our land are the following:

01. That the Government and the LTTE immediately with no loss of time bring to halt all types of killings and murders, through the intervention of the international community and of the Norwegian Facilitators of the Peace process.
02. That both these parties openly commit themselves to strictly & scrupulously observe all the terms of the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) under the continued facilitation of the Government of Norway.
03. That both the parties openly reject war in all its forms and appearances, with no loss of time.
04. That thus, creating an atmosphere of good will, seriously seek out ways to fruitfully resume the Peace Process on the footing of equality of partnership of the parties of the CFA as far as matters related to the Peace Process and Conflict Resolution are concerned.

Reported by the
Bishop of Mannar
Rt Rev.Dr.Rayappu Joseph.
18.06.2006, Mannar.