

Awakening the Weli Oya Villagers

Thavalama Foundation

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The Sinhala peasants who inhabit the strategic Weli Oya stretch which the terrorists have been attempting to ethnically cleanse since the 80's calling it their claim to a contiguous Eelam combining North and East, are not all colonists settled there since the 50's as terrorists and their apologists here and abroad have consistently been making out.

Last weekend when we reached this land mass from the Medawachchiya side we realised how much we too had come to believe this lie that had been drummed into us by terrorist propagandists. For we found so many ancient Sinhala villages in the environs of Padaviya resettlement done in the 50's. And some of these ancient villages have been totally abandoned due to terrorist attacks along with some Tamil villages in counter violence.

A large segment of these poor peasants, who barely eke out a living from this harsh environment, are direct descendents of the Veddahs who had marched with King Dutugemunu's army from the Menik Ganga basin to expel an invader in the ancient past.

For these true sons of mother Lanka, there are no bleeding heart liberals to even sound a whisper on their behalf, let alone any NGO to give a handout.

What crime or harm have they done to deserve the wrath of the terrorists. The only sin they had unwittingly committed appears to be to have adopted Sinhala names, language and life style.

Though they have been born hunters, these truly voiceless and mainly uneducated people without any clout anywhere, have been no match for marauding bands of organised Eelamist terrorists.

The violence has restricted their two main livelihoods cultivation and hunting. The result has been that many of them have been reduced to living on whatever handouts they come across.

Their future probably hangs not so much on the amount of victories notched by the army, but on the silent work of a single dedicated organisation known as *Thawalama Foundation*.

A dynamic young Lieutenant Colonel who is in charge of logistics of resettling terrorism affected peasants in the region realising army's own limitations in this regard whole

heartedly backs the yeomen and yet unsung service rendered by the Thawalama organisation to make these people economically strong.

This dedicated officer, who does not wish to have his name in print, points out that till Thawalama came along it was a case of soldiers going forward, while the villagers were retreating area by area hit by terrorists attacks.

The strange part about this increasingly successful operation is that while Thawalama itself is neither a big organisation nor backed by huge funds, it is already serving as the conduit to help 43 destitute villages in this belt so vital to the unity of this country.

The secret of its success appears to be that it has no self seekers trying to get personal mileage out of the work it is doing as is the case in so many so called service organisation.

According to the Lieutenant Colonel what it does is to introduce capable caring people in the south to these extremely needy god forsaken peasants of these parts.

Last weekend, we witnessed one such bridge building exercise, as the Lt. Colonel terms such introductions, when the Chairman of the Common Amenities Board P. Weerahandi took a lorry load of assistance from Colombo, along with a group comprising his family members, including children and a few friends to help distribute the parcels.

After a rather uncomfortable five-hour drive to Medawachchiya, we were escorted from there to the ancient village of Padiggama some 12 miles into the interior near Vavuniya District border.

When we arrived there after a drive of about another half an hour, true to the Thawalama principle of not handing out doles, the Colonel and the nearby Sarvodaya organistaion at Padaviya had organised a mass Shramadana to clean up the village of all surrounding shrub jungle and the drains and roads.

These people had grown so lethargic, their argument for not doing such work up to then had been that in case of a terrorist attack shrub would have given them plenty of cover to hide. Since the area is virtually surrounded by thick jungle any terrorist could similarly use the same cover to launch a surprise attack.

Terrorist threat is ever present. We found that out of about 125 families that make up this village, at least 80 had fled the area soon after the land mine attack in the nearby village of Gonamariyawa on June 28, killing eight policemen including a Sub-Inspector. And some of the families had returned only a few days before our arrival there.