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Jaffna bishop appeals to government: help us, we are in open prison

by Danielle Vella

Bishop Savundaranayagam has sent an urgent telegram to President Rajapakse calling for the re-opening of the A-9 highway to allow the delivery of necessary supplies to the worn out population of the peninsula. In Jaffna, people are queuing for food and kerosene as prices of goods

[Jaffna] The Bishop of Jaffna has urged the Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapakse to reopen the A-9 highway or to find another way to deliver desperately needed supplies to more than 600,000 people facing a humanitarian crisis in Jaffna peninsula.

The A-9 highway links the northern peninsula to the rest of the island and is the only road that can be used by heavy vehicles. Since the government closed it three months ago due to escalated warfare between the Tamil Tiger rebels and the Sri Lankan security forces, Jaffna residents have faced severe shortages food, medical and fuel supplies. *[Note: a copy of the Bishop's letter is appended to this report.]*

The tragic situation prompted Bishop Thomas Savundaranayagam to send an urgent appeal to the president yesterday: "I request you to open the A-9 Road or to provide another land route for the people of Jaffna so we will no longer feel we are constrained to live in an open prison." The bishop has also c alled on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to facilitate the reopening of this important highway.

The bishop faulted the government, army, foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and traders for what he described as a rapidly deteriorating scenario. "The situation has worsened within this short period of three months. Now the familiar sight in Jaffna is long queues of people standing to buy food."

Bishop Savundaranayagam said people were queuing for rations and outside any shop selling food, especially bread and "rare items" like powdered milk, match boxes and garlic. Kerosene is also in high demand. As essential items are in very short supply, prices have shot up. Local residents say the price of fish has also risen since the authorities imposed a quasi-total ban on fishing in Jaffna, a decision affecting around 100,000 members of families of fishermen.

The bishop laid the blame for the humanitarian crisis "first and foremost" on the Sri Lankan government, "which refuses to open the only link road or to provide another alternate land route". He also accused the army of "continuing to give the wrong picture to the government that there is enough food and fuel stocks in Jaffna". But foreign NGOs are also guilty, because they are "indifferent or lethargic about the essential food needs of the people of Jaffna peninsula." The government is ferrying emergency supplies to Jaffna by sea but local NGOs and other civil society leaders have claimed that supplies coming by ship fall far short of real need.

The reopening of the A-9 highway was a key demand of the LTTE in peace talks held in Geneva on 28 and 29 October. The government's refusal to open the route led to the failure of the talks. The reasons cited by the government for refusing were that the Tamil Tigers attacked the road and extorted fees from vehicles using it, and that opening the route would allow the rebels to freely transport their weapons and fighters. The government later said it would reopen the A-9 if the rebels "stopped acts of hostility".

But continuing violence in the northeast does not leave much room for hope that hostilities will cease. Only yesterday, 2 November, the rebels accused the Sri Lankan air force of killing five civilians in a raid on Kilinochchi, a claim backed by European monitors.

H.E.Mahinda Rajapakse
President of Sri Lanka,
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Your Excellency

Increasing Famine and Food-queues in Jaffna

I would like to bring to your kind attention the present plight of the people living in the Jaffna Peninsula From the first week of the month of August there has been an increasing shortage of food and situation has worsened within this short period of 3 months. Now the familiar sight in Jaffna is the long line of people standing to buy food, especially queues for Food. There is a long queue in front of every co-operative out-let. There is also a long queues every morning in front of every bakery to buy a loaf of bread There is also queues of people at the SL Army temporary ration out- lets.
There is long queues at the petrol -sheds for kerosene .Queues also gather at private shops when some rare item like, Powdered Milk, Match-box or garlic is being sold.

There is the acute shortage of consumer items like infant food, milk powder, biscuits etcThe Local NGOs have recently indicated in the press the prices of essential commodities sold in the black (1 Kg of rice Rs 120, flour Rs150,Sugar Rs 450,Coconut Rs 80 etc) There is queues in the Hospital also since there is a dearth of Doctors and Specialists. This is also true of medicines in the Pharmacy.
Who are to be blamed for this state of affairs.

1-First and foremost the SLGovernment which refuses to open the only link road ,A 9 route or provide another alternate land route to the mainland.
2-The SL Army and Govt .Secretariat in Jaffna which continue to give the wrong picture to the Govt that they can adequately serve the people of the Peninsula by bringing food and fuel by ship.
3-The Private Traders who have let down the people at a this time of present need.
4-And the Foreign NGOs who are indifferent or lethargic about the essential food -needs of the people of the Jaffna Peninsula.

The War and the firing of Artillery shells is going on for the 3rd month, unmindful of the enormous cost to the country in terms of money and destruction to property.

Hence your Excellency, may I kindly request you to open the A9 Road or provide another land route for the people of Jaffna so that we do not feel that we are constrained any more to live in an open prison .

Yours truly,
+ Thomas Savundaranayagam
Rt.Rev.Dr.Thomas Savundaranayagam
Bishop of Jaffna.
25-10-06.