



Sri Lankan Steers Parents to Peace After Loss in War

April 19, 2006



Visaka Dharmadasa works to bridge the gaps between factions that have fought for two decades in Sri Lanka. (Courtesy Hunt Alternative Fund)

By Nora Boustany

Wednesday, April 19, 2006; Page A12

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It was a victory, of sorts.

Repeated inquiries at the Defense Ministry, the army command and the International Committee of the Red Cross yielded no answers about the fate of her second son, 2nd Lt. Achin Tcha . She was not alone. There were 619 men still missing from that battle on Sept. 27, 1998, and more than 600 families had received no news of their whereabouts or remains.

So Dharmadasa took other parents and a film crew to the field in late April 2003. All that remained were helmets, shoulder bags and bones. "If I had known what we were to see, I would never have taken those parents with me. We just broke down and cried. I was expecting a black patch of land. The soldiers were not cremated, just incinerated," she recalled in an interview last week in Washington.

She was here to receive an award from InterAction, an alliance of nongovernmental, U.S.-based international development and humanitarian organizations, for her work on behalf of parents of servicemen missing in action. Dharmadasa, 49, is founder and chair of the Association of War Affected Women and another group, Parents of Servicemen Missing in Action.

After the trip to the battlefield, the parents filed a lawsuit requesting a mass funeral and DNA testing so Buddhist, Muslim and Christian families could collect remains and give their sons proper burials. The Defense Ministry carried out the funeral but has not acted on DNA testing.

"When your child or your husband is missing, anxiety increases. When death is certain, you know, you grieve. As time passes and you are still wondering, you cannot move on. Your family is paralyzed, and it can never be the same," she said. She had stopped helping her husband in his jewelry store and given up tutoring foreign students in Sinhalese.

She and her husband and two other sons still call one another for reassurance during the day. "We feel insecure," said her husband, Somenath Parua, who accompanied her to the United States.

Despite a cease-fire in 2002 between the government and the Tamil Tiger rebels who have been fighting for 20 years for a separate homeland on Sri Lanka, an island off India's southeastern coast, the country is threatened with a relapse into war. Yesterday mediators were trying to salvage planned peace talks after recent violence.

After the 1998 battle, Dharmadasa wanted the authorities to understand that the mere assertion by the army that her son had not returned was not enough. She urged the military to have a religious ceremony, at least -- a flower offering. When families congregated for the Buddhist rite in Colombo, the capital, she distributed the telephone number of the local Red Cross office and asked the family members to bang on the door of the relief organization. Parents learned that the military was not recovering the soldiers' bodies.

She also went beyond the network of military families. Hoping to connect with parents of rebels, she traveled to their shrines and other places of worship, introducing herself. "I am the mother of a missing soldier," she told them. "If you don't join me today, the child holding your hand may be lost to you forever." Parents of the fighters, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, were sympathetic. "They were really listening to us," she recalled. She got them to sign petitions to help end the war.

She took other mothers with her to Jafna, the northernmost Tamil town, and listened to the views of residents young and old. "We don't want television and telephones, which you have," an old Tamil woman told her. "We want our dignity. If you can't let us be human beings, then keep us separate." Dharmadasa said she came to understand how Tamil residents felt discrimination and had grown to resent the majority Sinhalese. When she travels to those areas today, she stays with Tamil families who have become her friends.

"It is unfortunate that this happened to me. But I want to open the eyes of many others to issues that are not taken seriously," she said. "I have met mothers from Chile, Russia and Kosovo. I am just a mother with no agenda. Frankly, I am a victim, but I have also learned how to assume leadership."

She added: "I want to see my country get out of this mess. I want to see women make decisions in the peace process. I want women sitting at the table. I am trying to change things for the betterment of all of us."

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