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EXEMPLARY SOUTHERN RESPONSE

Today the people of the South are truly overwhelmed by the unfolding humanitarian crisis in the Vanni where the deluge of civilians who had fled the LTTE are languishing in temporary shelters.

During the past few weeks one witnessed the spontaneous outpouring of sympathy and genuine feeling among the majority community towards their unfortunate brethren who had escaped from their captors and are in various states of degradation and despair.

The flood of donations from cash contributions to various relief funds by the public to the rallying of the masses at temples, churches and other centres with food, clothing and essential items are but a manifestation of this concern and empathy in the South with these hapless folk.

There is no doubt the quantum of relief will become a deluge in the coming days as more and more contribute their mite to ameliorate the conditions of the IDPs going on to supplement the massive foreign assistance pouring into the country on their behalf.

But as the famous Christian saying goes man does not live by bread alone. There is need for nurturing the spirit as well.

It is in this context that the statement issued by Bishop of Colombo Rev. Dr. Duleep de Chickera the other day assumes significance. His Lordship said, "We require a visible shift from sympathy for the IDPs to an affirmation of their rights and dignity as Sri Lankans".

Being a man of God it is natural for him to espouse the precepts of equality and dignity of the human being. Implied in the Bishop's statement is that in the melee of the outpouring of sympathy as manifest in the bountiful largesse of the Sinhala community one could lose sight of the more fundamental issues affecting the Tamil community.

Gender mainstreaming and welfare of women IDPs

With the Jaffna Peninsula being liberated by the Armed Forces and influx of refugees to the Government controlled areas in particular, the role of looking after the welfare of women refugees is immense. Here are extracts from an interview conducted with the Chairperson of the National Committee on Women (NCW), Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment Dr. Neela Gunasekara on the welfare of women.

► FULL STORY

THE HINDU
EDITORIAL
MAY 2,
2009:

Sri Lanka: What needs to be done

There is a humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka's North, involving tens of thousands of Tamil civilians uprooted from their homes or held hostage in an embattled sliver of coastal land that barely comprises seven square km.

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Magnificent discharge of Presidential prerogatives

It is three decades since we were unexpectedly forced to accept the novel role of presidential rule and during that space of time, we have seen four past Presidents who tried on their own way to hammer out an approach to the problem of the LTTE terror; the most urgent job faced by them. Their approaches neither bolstered national

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DEFENDERS OF THE NATION

Food is essential for survival and there is no doubt that food and clothing will keep reaching the IDPs in a steady stream. If there is one thing the civilian exodus in the North went on to underline, it was certainly that the majority Sinhalese has no ill will or animus against the Tamil community.

interest nor yielded tangible success as that of what we see today.

► FULL STORY

The lighting of crackers and rejoicing in the South on the capture of key LTTE strongholds were but an eruption of joy on the vanquishing of LTTE terrorism that brought so much misery to peoples' lives in the South.

There was not a single reported incident of harassment of Tamils in the South amidst this euphoria. This showed that our people have come a long way since those dark days of July '83. On the contrary they now empathise with the Tamil people in their plight as the past weeks have demonstrated.

But we should all now move on to the next phase of reconciliation and rebuilding of damaged trust. For this we should consider our Tamil brethren as equal partners in the future journey of this country. This cannot be achieved without first restoring their dignity and honour as equal citizens.

As the Bishop has noted "These persons simply cannot lose their rights as Sri Lankans because they were trapped under the LTTE in the Vanni. In fact they crossed over at great risk in a courageous demonstration of their right to movement as Sri Lankans".

By this alone they earned the right to be treated as equals and the sooner we shifted from sympathy at their plight to "affirmation of their rights and dignity" the easier it would be in the integration process.

The Bishop has made some pertinent suggestions which should engage the attention of the Government authorities in the recovery process particularly the call for a multi-task approach to attaining normalcy.

Here the Bishop has suggested that screening and counselling of civilians should run concurrent with the process of de-mining and the building of houses and infrastructure with the people released in batches to return to their homes and villages.

The suggestion is worthy of consideration as it would shorten the stay of the civilians in IDP camps for long periods. It would also help these civilians shed the trauma of their harrowing ordeal in familiar settings.

But what of their livelihoods and means of existence? These are people who have been

uprooted from their homes and virtually condemned to a slow death by the LTTE (of course most of them took a quicker route via LTTE guns).

Mere settling them in their dwellings alone would not restore their lives. They have to be guided to pick up the pieces of their lives and this is a task that could not be accomplished in the short term.

Therefore the Government is confronted with a gargantuan task in the resettlement process where it would need all the assistance of not just from international donors but every Sri Lankan, because it would be question of rising from the ashes.

The Bishop also made a pertinent point that we should overcome our tendency to see 'ghosts of the LTTE in every Tamil'. This his Lordship said would hold the entire community under surveillance for the rest of their lives.

Going by the exemplary conduct of the Sinhala community amidst grave provocations by the

LTTE all these years, one can venture to state with confidence that Tamils will not be pushed to assume a xenophobic mindset.

Especially after what they underwent at the hands of their so called protectors all these years.

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