

APJN visit to Sri Lanka

A delegation led by the Right Reverend James Ottley, Anglican Observer at the United Nations and three members of the Anglican Peace and Justice network met in Sri Lanka under the sponsorship of the National Christian Council, the ecumenical body for Protestant and Anglican churches. The three APJN members were the The Reverend Canon Naim Ateek (the Middle East), Lay Canon Jenny Te Paa (New Zealand, Aotearoa and Polynesia) and The Rev. Canon Brian Grieves (the United States).

The purpose of the visit was to affirm the role of the church in Sri Lankan society and to assess the current prospects for peace in the 15 year conflict between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, a Tamil separatist organization. The churches, including the present Anglican bishop of Colombo, have been involved in attempts at a negotiated solution. Currently, there are no negotiations and the government is pursuing a military solution, while being open to negotiation.

Sri Lanka is made up of a majority of Sinhalese, most of whom are Buddhist. Buddhism dates back 2500 years in the country and there is a strong belief among many Sinhalese Buddhists that Sri Lanka is historically and therefore properly a Buddhist country. The constitution gives preference to Buddhism while acknowledging the rights of other minority religions, primarily Christians, Muslims and Hindus. This preference is problematic to developing a truly free society even though the government is democratic, with the minority Tamils having some members elected to Parliament.

The war has caused immense suffering, especially in the north and east where thousands of citizens have been displaced. There is evidence of human rights abuses by both sides, some of them brutal and deadly. The international community is responding with large amounts of humanitarian aid, but little is being done to facilitate a solution to the conflict.

In meetings with the Justice and Peace committee of the NCC, the Anglican bishop of Colombo, the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, a senior Buddhist monk, a Tamil member of parliament, the Buddhist Congress and various Tamil groups in Jaffna (which has recently been retaken by the government from the LTTE), the delegation made the following observations:

- A military solution to the conflict is not credible. While the delegation heard Sinhalese voices calling for a clear military strategy as the best solution to defeat the LTTE, and while there are charges that the LTTE has not always negotiated in good faith and has committed heinous acts of terrorism, negotiation seems the only viable road to peace.
- The present government has tried earnestly to pursue peace with the LTTE, but the approaches and expectations by both sides differed and failed. If the government is to succeed in another effort at negotiations, it must receive the support of Sri Lanka's political opposition parties.
- Outside help is needed to bring the parties to the negotiating table. Assistance is needed in the form of facilitators, not mediators.
- The best role for the church is that of building a spiritual base on which to promote peace. An appeal by Christian leaders to the best values of all the religious voices that make up Sri Lankan society would be a great gift to all the people of the country.