What happened to their children?

Wednesday, 08 July 2009
Last Updated Wednesday, 08 July 2009

by Kath Noble It would be foolhardy to assume that the conflict in Sri Lanka was irretrievably over. Prabhakaran is gone, but the Tiger diaspora is sounding as fierce as ever. They won’t do anything that involves moving from the comfort of their Western armchairs, internet cafes and lobby bars, but they have money. Whether this can be translated into bombs in Colombo depends to a large extent on the mentality of the Tiger cadres on the ground, so I was particularly interested during my recent trip northwards to meet some of those who had been detained by the Army.
More than 9,500 Tiger cadres are being held in a dozen or so camps around Vavuniya, of which I was able to visit two. Men have been separated from women, and there is a combination of longstanding members and new recruits in each place. The first camp was in an old school building, tucked away down a narrow alley in the centre of town. It housed about 300 men, from teenagers to the middle aged. A few looked like children, small and with very innocent faces, but we were assured that those under 16 had been moved to a special location. Our group seemed to be of tremendous interest to the detainees. Activities that had been going on when we entered the main hall stopped almost immediately, and people moved to gather round. Some of the men had been dozing on their mats in the corner, but they too got up, quickly rearranging their sarongs. Curious about our purpose, they wanted to talk. I was introduced to a man who had been in the LTTE for 15 years. Now 31, he had known little else. He was from Kilinochchi and had been in the Tiger police. He had escaped with his wife and two children on May 17th. He asked where we were from. Apart from the International Committee of the Red Cross, who had been to record their details and inspect the conditions in which they were being held, they had not seen any foreigners. However, many of them had received visits from family members. The man that I was talking to said that his parents had come all the way from India. He wanted to know if we had any idea what the authorities were going to do with them, to which we replied that as far as we could tell, the Government was in the process of working out a rehabilitation programme. Speaking easily, he said that this uncertainty was their most serious concern. Relations between the LTTE cadres and their minders seemed to be good. He was surprised to find that the officer in charge was very educated, he told us, and they had had many interesting conversations. Meanwhile, a friend of mine who visited a different camp reported that soldiers and detainees were playing cricket together and even discussing battles in which they had fought on opposite sides. One of the people I had travelled with decided to ask what the Government would have to do to prevent him from going back to the armed struggle. This seemed to me a rather peculiar question in the circumstances, and it took some time to explain. Reference was made to the Thirteenth Amendment, federalism and many of the other solutions that have been put forward over the years. What political reforms are needed, my colleague insisted. When he finally grasped what was being asked, the man laughed. We lost, he said with a shrug of his shoulders. He explained that they had tried their best for Eelam, but it hadn’t worked. He said that they would have to rely on political parties to work for their people now, referring to the upcoming elections in Vavuniya and Jaffna. I asked who he would vote for if he had the chance, a question he sidestepped, commenting that he thought that Douglas Devananda would win. An older person intervened in the discussion with some thoughts on the future. From the Mullaitivu area, he had a wife and a small child, and he had been a medical cadre in the LTTE for nine years. He had surrendered on May 16th. Our generation can’t forget, he said. He didn’t think that the Sinhalese community would be able to put the conflict behind them either, given what had happened over the years. It is for the children to make things better, he stressed. Without elaborating further, he suggested that we might like to meet an English boy who was amongst their group. This was a surprising development, and he was summoned from the upstairs room in which he had been resting. He turned out to be Canadian, with the accent to prove it. Now 26, he had moved to Toronto when he was only 12. He claimed that he had returned to Sri Lanka in 2007 to visit some relatives in Kilinochchi, and had been forcibly conscripted by the LTTE. The Tiger police had turned up at the place where he was staying not long after he had arrived, he said, confiscating his passport and compelling him to join them. He had found his relatives in Mullaitivu only weeks before the end of the fighting. They were rescued by the Army on May 17th. His cousin was being held in the same place. At 24, the LTTE had exempted him from recruitment until February this year because he had worked in one of their garages. When Kilinochchi fell and they withdrew eastwards, he had been taken into the fighting ranks too. The Canadian was the only person to talk about the ordeal that they had been through. Stressing the need for counsellors to visit them as soon as possible, he spoke of his roommate, a teenager who had seen his parents blown up in front of him. They had all witnessed too many awful things in the fighting, he said. The rest of the group didn’t seem to feel the need to discuss it, he added, but he would be going to a therapist as soon as he got back to Toronto. When we got to the second camp, which was in a university hostel some distance out of town, I understood just how eager the men had been to communicate. They had approached us, and even those who couldn’t participate in the discussion because of language problems had stood and listened to what was being said, getting translations where necessary. By contrast, the women seemed indifferent to our presence. Smiles were eventually returned, but they weren’t very enthusiastic until one of the people we were travelling with started a game. This soon brought pretty much all of the detainees out of their rooms, giggling like the teenagers that they probably were. They seemed a good deal younger than the men that we had come across. I wandered outside to where a group were preparing lunch. One girl was stirring a massive pot of rice, while another was cutting up potatoes and five or six others were attempting to lift a huge kettle of boiling water off the open fire. It looked like hard work, but they must have been glad of having something to do. Unlike at the men’s camp, activities weren’t organised, there was no radio or television and no equipment for sports, and they hadn’t started classes. Having stood and watched for some time, I asked whether anybody could speak English. They all shook their heads. When I mentioned Sinhala, their eyebrows nearly disappeared under their hairlines. That was a rather distasteful suggestion, their facial expressions implied with total clarity. Tamil only, the potato cutter emphasised, demonstrating that she did know a bit of

English after all. These limited experiences may not be sufficient to draw any conclusions about the state of mind of the remaining Tiger cadres, but they do serve to highlight some of the things that the Government could do to help to avoid a return to violence. With far greater numbers than were expected, the process of rehabilitation was bound to get delayed, but this excuse can’t be used for much longer. The Tiger diaspora is hard at work, generating propaganda that is undermined by the very existence of the people that I met. Let’s hope that their efforts will be outdone. Kath Noble is a freelance journalist based in Colombo. She may be contacted by email at kathnoble99@gmail.com. Courtesy: Island.lk