

Fr. Alfred Alexander, SSS.
St. Philip Neri's Church.

THE SHATTERING SAGA OF THE A9 CONTROVERSY

Shashikala Raviraj, the young widow of slain human rights promoter and parliamentarian, made a humble request to the Foreign Minister to open the A9 Road Muhamalai entry point to take her husband's remains to her home town, Chavakachcheri for cremation. Within a few hours of her request she received a reply from the Government spokesperson, Hon. Minister Kehelika Rambukwella that all facilities will be given to her to transport the remains of her husband and not what she asked for, namely, the opening of the A9 Road. It is my humble opinion that if His Excellency the President had made a spontaneous forthright gesture to open the A9 to accommodate a tragic humanitarian cause it would have been a new chapter for the Government. But His Excellency the President and the Hon. Prime Minister (besides many others) who spoke of the late Mr. Nadaraj Raviraj being a bridge-builder and peace maker among all races, sadly lacked the vision and the foresight in the first place, to open the A9 highway on this occasion as a magnanimous gesture without Mrs. Raviraj intervening in this matter. This act of magnanimity would have been a turning point for the Government and the LTTE to resume the already stalled peace talks. Spontaneous sincere signals such as these what the peace-loving people expect both of the LTTE and the Government today rather than the war of tomorrow to revive the shattered confidence between the two estranged parties. Sadly however, the country has once again lost yet another chance to deliver peace to the people.

Heaping accolades on Hon. Parliamentarian Raviraja after his death is totally meaningless, but, what is truly meaningful is to accept and implement the dream he had for the country- a united Sri Lanka in meeting the aspirations of the Tamils and Muslims in the East and the North. In fact, Raviraj was slain for the very principle he stood for, namely, the right for all to live in this country as one, as equals and as partners. Of course, knowing Raviraj, the opening of the A9 road would have been the last thing he would have expected for his own dead body! However, this would have been the opportune moment for the Government to demonstrate its solidarity and not sympathy towards the six million suffering masses of humanity in the North languishing behind the 'Berlin-Wall.'

Yes. Only the people with means could travel by air, only the young and healthy could travel by sea but little does the Government realize that a great bulk of the helpless, voiceless poor in the peninsula have to depend on the A9 Road for their transport and livelihood. They are the farmers and fishermen, small scale business traders and transport providers ranging from pushbikes to buses along the A9 road. These are the people who deserve to be helped and therefore need to be helped. Their livelihood depends entirely on their meager earnings. Furthermore, this trunk (artery) road is the only one that geographically and psychologically links with the rest of the provinces especially the East. Depriving the people of traveling on this road means depriving them of being one with the rest in the island by severing the North from the rest! Those who travel by air do not have to worry about the cost of their air tickets or to pay the LTTE tax on luxury

items when traveled on A9 road. I am told the LTTE cadres do not indulge in smoking, drinking, wasting money on sumptuous meals etc. that's why I suppose they levy tax on luxury items but not on essential items for the poor man's daily need. Having said that, I know personally, there are also people who are often compelled to fly in and out of Colombo and Jaffna out of dire necessity subsequent to the closure A9 Road. Tragically however, the A9 road will always remain the poor man's highway.

And so, not opening the A9 road on account of the sole question of tax being paid to the LTTE is a travesty of truth. People in the North and East know better than the law-makers that the LTTE can survive without this tax system; which they have clearly demonstrated after the closure of the A9 Road and during the earlier times of war. Somehow they have managed and are still managing to survive even after the EU's ban on them. By the same token, the Government too has burdened people with a variety of levies on people living in cleared areas. Alas, the taxpayer alone would know how his/her money is being misused or wasted by policy makers and rulers. We have only to look at the protest-rallies and satyagraha (holding on truth) campaigns in cleared areas because of the glaring misuse of national funds by V.I.P.s traveling abroad, buying expensive cars, parties, and putting up luxurious mansions and renovation of luxury-homes that even the former President was allegedly guilty of.

I, for one who have traveled often between Jaffna and Colombo know that the Government's suggested alternative route via Pooneryn to the North, means people would still have to go through the LTTE entry point at Kangarayan Kulam and pay tax to the LTTE. Further this is not a route that can be used by heavy vehicles transporting essential items to the North. Further more, the reconstruction of this narrow road would take more than a year! Hence, one can assume here that it isn't the question of paying tax to the LTTE, but it is, perhaps, a military strategy to gain more cleared areas which will result further in butchering of more of young combatants on both sides of the divide. All these exercises would not be necessary if the Government could immediately put an end to all paramilitary activities in this country while adhering to the CFA. The country as a whole would not have reached this deadlock with regard to peace-talks had the Government implemented the agreement it had come to at the 1st Oslo meeting, namely to disarm the paramilitary groups working with or behind the Government forces. If it had acted in accordance with the agreement reached at Oslo, the talks between the LTTE and the Government would have been taken forward, many a life could have been saved, and the A9 road would have been opened! It is still not late. Let the recent carnage of one Sinhala and one Tamil who related themselves to each other as buddies, irrespective of their many differences and killed by an assailant before the eyes this Government, be an eye-opener for the law makers and rulers of our beloved country!