

“Sri Lanka’s Forgotten Martyrs: Christian Clergy Murdered and Disappeared (1983-2009)”

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“For over three decades, Sri Lanka’s Catholic clergy risked—and lost—their lives defending the oppressed. From the bloody ethnic riots of 1983 to the final days of the civil war in 2009, priests and nuns who spoke against human rights violations faced brutal consequences. Through previously undocumented cases, this investigation reveals how clergy members were systematically targeted by government forces, paramilitary groups, and the IPKF for protecting Tamil civilians, exposing disappearances, and advocating for the vulnerable. Their stories, from Mannar to Batticaloa to Buttala, paint a devastating picture of religious persecution and state impunity.”

Christianity gained popularity in Sri Lanka following the arrival of European invaders and became a widely practiced religion over time. The Nestorian crosses discovered during archaeological excavations in Anuradhapura, which was a prominent commercial city in the past, serve as evidence of the arrival of Christian traders. However, Christianity was not widespread in the country at that time; it took root with the arrival of the Portuguese.

In recent decades, numerous Christian fathers have been killed or disappeared for standing up to protect the oppressed against enforced disappearances, killings and other human rights violations that occurred amid conflict in the North and South. The story of these fathers who sacrificed their lives in alignment with the liberating principles of Christianity begins in the 1980s. Many were advocates for the oppressed Tamil speaking communities in the North and East. Some were shot by government forces or paramilitary groups supported by the government while others were forcibly abducted.

The little flower who fell after being shot

In July 1983, as violence against Tamils spread across the country, Malaiyaha Tamils took refuge at the Little Flower Convent. The marauding groups, intoxicated with racism, were searching for Reverend Bosco Madhuranayagam, a target of the wrath of an UNP MP due to his advocacy for plantation workers. Sister Mary Agneta courageously intervened to protect the frightened Tamils, including the priest.

On the night of July 27, 1983 Sister Agneta heard a loud explosion and saw flames erupting in front of the convent. When she opened a window, she saw thugs throwing petrol bombs and opening fire. She was admitted to hospital, unconscious from heavy bleeding. Succumbing to injuries caused by eight bullets that had pierced her body, she died a few days later.

Christian Fathers of Mannar

In December 1984, as the war in Mannar intensified, government security forces turned their

attention to those working for the welfare of the displaced. Father George Jeyarajasingham, who managed a farm and a housing complex for Tamil survivors of the July 1983 violence who had come to Mannar as orphans, was summoned to the Thalaadi Army Camp for questioning on December 13, 1984.

After a lengthy interrogation, Father Jeyarajasingham left the camp and began his journey toward Mannar town. Along the way he gave a ride to a police officer who had requested transportation. While travelling on Murukkan Road in Mannar, an armed group intercepted the van and set it on fire with Father Jeyarajasingham, his driver and the police officer inside and then fled the scene.

Although the people in the area were able to identify Father Jeyarajasingham and the others, along with the van, no one took action on their behalf. Only Father Mary Bastian, who had been fearlessly working against human rights violations in the area, collected the charred bodies of Father Jeyarajasingham and the others and buried them.

None of the residents of Mannar came forward to assist the team investigating the crime. However, Father Mary Bastian was brave enough to provide the necessary evidence, which made him a target of government forces' wrath. On the morning of January 6, 1985, a bullet was fired through the window of his lodging; his body remains missing to this day.

Minister of National Security, Lalith Athulathmudali, who denied the allegations against the army regarding Father Bastian's death, claimed that he had fled to India.

The Buttala shrine covered in blood

Father Michael Rodrigo was a well-known figure among the people of the South. He, along with Father Tissa Balasuriya, helped establish the Maradana Centre for Social and Religious Affairs and opposed the forced land acquisition and exploitation of Monaragala farmers by multinational companies. Father Michael, educated in France, left Colombo, to live a modest life in Buttala. However, he could not escape the turbulent times that prevailed in the South during that period. Despite the risks associated with speaking out about human rights violations and the pleas from his friends to leave the area, he decided to stay with the villagers of Alukalawita.

That decision led to tragic consequences on November 10, 1987. While attending evening mass a gun was fired from a window, causing the priest to fall onto the shrine, his head shattered by the bullet. Military officers had regularly visited Father Michael to investigate allegations that he was supporting a youth rebel movement.

Indian military atrocities in Batticaloa

While government forces, which had been occupying the northern and eastern provinces, were being recalled to the South to suppress youth uprisings, the brutal actions of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), which had arrived in the northern and eastern provinces in August 1987, inflicted another round of suffering on the Tamil people.

A massive demonstration was held in Batticaloa in response to the increasing attacks, abductions, disappearances, sexual violence, crimes against women, killings and property damage in the provinces under the control of the IPKF. The intervention was led by the Citizens' Committee, headed by Father Chandra Fernando, along with a group of human rights organizations and religious leaders.

The IPKF responded to the peaceful demonstration with tear gas and live ammunition. From that point on, Father Chandra Fernando faced the wrath of the Indian Army, as well as the armed groups

PLOT and TELO, who were aligned with it. Father Chandra, who refused to leave Batticaloa despite numerous threats to his life, was killed at his lodging house on July 6, 1988 by an unknown gunman.

The American priest who sought Tamil-Muslim Unity

Although Father Eugene John Herbert was born in the US, he spent decades serving as a missionary in Sri Lanka. The conflicts that raged in the East in the 1990s became increasingly severe as tensions between the Tamil and Muslim communities escalated.

Father Herbert, along with his assistant Bertram Francis, took on the responsibility of escorting the nuns, girls and their assistants to a secure location. While returning, they were intercepted by an armed group at Eravur. Father Herbert was captured. His body has never been found.

As the fighting intensified, the people of Sori Kalmunai, located just outside the city, were severely affected. They had to travel to the towns of Kalmunai or Samanthurai to buy their daily necessities. Patients could only purchase the medicine they needed by coming to these towns. The intervention of Father Santhiagupillai Selvaraja, who was responsible for the welfare of the villagers, brought great comfort to the helpless people.

On July 11, 1997 Father Selvaraja had gone to Kalmunai town and was returning on his motorcycle with necessary items and food for the children when he was attacked by an armed group on the way. Although it is suspected that he was killed, Father Selvaraja's body has never been found.

Disappearance at the end of the war

Father Thiruchelvam Jim Brown and his assistant Venceslas Wimalathas went missing on August 20, 2006 while visiting a group of displaced civilians in a village under the control of the Navy. They were last seen at a security checkpoint at Allaipiddi Junction. During the investigations conducted by the Catholic church and the police, the Navy stated that they had recorded the entry into the area at 1.50 pm and the exit at 2.10 pm. However, the Navy refused to provide the relevant records to the police for examination.

Father Francis Joseph, who accompanied a group of LTTE members to surrender to the government army, was listed as missing on the day the war ended in May 2009. Father Francis was last seen being taken away in a military bus after surrendering to the army. As a Catholic priest, he boarded the bus with the assumption that those who surrendered would find protection there.

No government has ever taken steps to conduct an independent investigation into the murders and disappearances of these Christian priests and nuns or to ensure justice and accountability. Apart from a few incidents that are trumpeted in political forums, many other such human rights violations remain unpunished, with no accountability.

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P.S.

Groundviews

<https://groundviews.org/2024/12/25/they-nailed-themselves-to-the-cross/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0C>

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