

The Sri Lanka Team in 1990

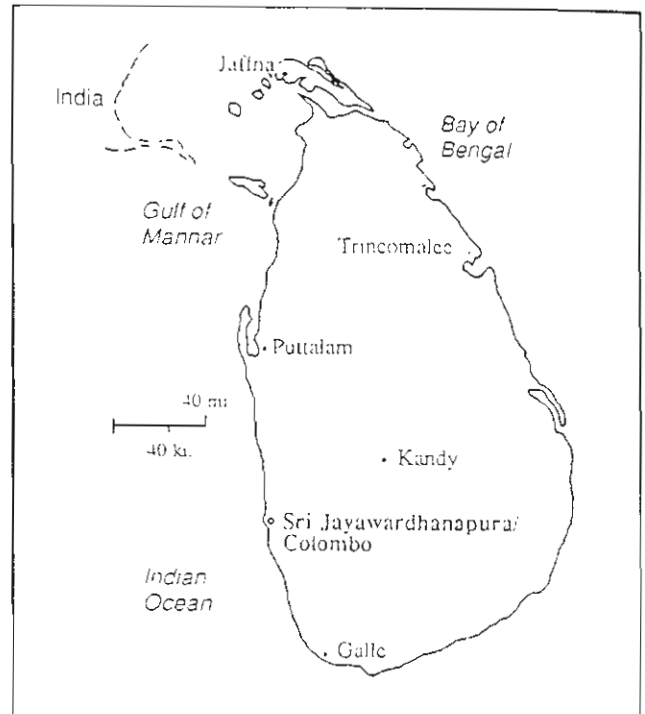
Circumstances changed drastically in the island nation of Sri Lanka in 1990, surprising all observers of the situation. The year began with the continuing insurrection of the People's Revolutionary Front (JVP) and the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign orchestrated by the government, filling the roads and rivers of the South with corpses. The stalemated war between the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) dragged on past deadline after deadline for the withdrawal of the Indians. In January, JVP leaders were located in hiding and virtually all were killed while in custody. Though the JVP has not disappeared, their activity has been reduced substantially.

In March, the IPKF did finally return to India, giving the island a brief period of peace as the struggle in the northeast became largely political. Various Tamil groups jockeyed for position before anticipated regional elections, while the government negotiated details of some kind of resolution with the Tigers. But in June, Tiger groups in the east seized a large number of police officers, starting a full-scale war between LTTE and the Sri Lanka government, with bombings of civilian areas by the Air Force and attacks on border villages by the Tigers. Even food and medical convoys organized by the Red Cross were subjected to aerial attack. Despite the continuing violence, the "victory" over the JVP opened a tenuous space for the reorganization of popular groups, quickly occupied by trade unions, women's groups and new human rights organizations.

Prominent among these were associations of the families of the disappeared. (Educated estimates of the number of disappeared in Sri Lanka over the last three years range as high as 60,000.) The government responded to this renewed activity with an order in late July for police in the south to shoot demonstrators on sight.

At the start of 1990, PBI had just three volunteers in the field, working primarily with two lawyers engaged in habeas corpus litigation for disappeared people. As conditions changed, and thanks to the continued presence of long-term volunteers, the nature of our work also changed.

Early in the year, the team began to occasionally accompany some religious leaders under threat for their reconciliation work. That brought PBI in contact with the Nequmbo United People's Organization (NUPO), a grassroots coalition involved in empowering smaller groups to organize and plan strategies for improving



their situation. Following serious threats to some of the field workers of NUPO, the team began to provide a weekly presence at the NUPO offices, including during meetings of the fledgling Human Rights Network, which brings together representatives of a wide range of groups to search for effective ways of defending basic rights. The team has also been providing a presence at the public rallies of the Organization of Family Members of the Disappeared throughout the southeast.

An important case, both for PBI's work and for the country, began in February with the kidnapping and killing of noted journalist Richard de Zoysa. (See page 9) PBI escorted Dr. Saravanamuttu and her lawyer Batty Weerakoon 24 hours a day throughout the legal process, which ended when the Attorney General determined that there was "not enough evidence" to proceed. The team still escorts them on an as-needed basis while they continue to struggle for an impartial investigation of the case.

The PBI team in Sri Lanka grew considerably in 1990, from four volunteers to seven as we enter 1991. Additionally, the PBI directorate removed a geographic limitation which had been placed on the project, opening the possibility of work in the Northeast.

One handicap to the team's work has been a lack of female volunteers. As the new year begins, two are scheduled to arrive, but this is an area in which we would like to improve. Our goal is to have a stable gender-balanced team to respond to the increasing requests for PBI's services as our presence and role is more widely understood.



PBI escort Yeshua Moser accompanies Batty Weerakoon during his human rights work. PBI Photo

The De Zoysa Case

For most of 1990, the PBI Sri Lanka team has played a role in Sri Lanka's most controversial human rights case. In February 1990, Richard de Zoysa, once a government broadcaster but more recently a prominent human rights journalist, was murdered.

His mother, Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu, witnessed the abduction and identified two members of the death squad involved. The two are high-ranking Colombo police officers. Both Dr. Saravanamuttu and her attorney, Batty Weerakoon, received death threats for pursuing the case in the face of police unwillingness to investigate. PBI provided Dr. Saravanamuttu with around-the-clock accompaniment until she could temporarily escape to Europe.

In Europe, Dr. Saravanamuttu spoke at many human rights forums, attracting widespread public attention. In October, the European Economic Community prominently singled out the de Zoysa case in their joint donors' statement on aid to Sri Lanka. It noted "with regret that the enquiry into the killing has made such little progress.

Dr. Saravanamuttu returned to Sri Lanka and team members continue to escort her as she works on behalf of the Mother's Front, an organization of mothers of the disappeared that has recently come under severe pressure from the government. The de Zoysa case is the first time that a highly credible, English-speaking witness has been willing to identify the perpetrators in a

death squad murder, thereby linking a death squad with the state security apparatus. Many mothers in Sri Lanka in recent years have witnessed abduction or killing of one of their children, but they dare not speak out for fear of reprisals against their other children. As Richard was her only child, Dr. Saravanamuttu says she has nothing more to lose.

The case has been doggedly pursued by Mr. Weerakoon, both in the courts and in Parliament. He is determined to make the facts of this case known, despite the high assassination rate in Sri Lanka for human rights lawyers. For many months the team provided Mr. Weerakoon with an escort 24 hours a day, at home and in the courts. While these long hours have tapered off, PBI continues to escort Mr. Weerakoon as needed. The team is honored to provide nonviolent security for these two courageous people who are essential to human rights reform in Sri Lanka. ❖

