

St John's College,

An Update - April 1997

The College took a heavy beating during the Army Offensive of October 1995. The heaviest damage was to the library, the Jubilee hall and the Principal's bungalow. The other buildings that sustained damage were the office block, the lower school block, Pooranampillai block, the lower school block, the new science complex, kitchen and kitchen staff quarters, vice Principal's bungalow and minor damage to a few other buildings. In addition, before and after the army offensive, many valuable equipment had been taken away. This included computers, typewriters, duplicators, furniture, hostel beds, kitchen equipment, asbestos roofing, and practically all that could be carried away.

Just before the offensive, the entire school population were forcibly evacuated. They moved to areas in Vadamaradchy, Thenmaradchy and south of Elephant Pass, mainly to Kilinochchi. Some managed to go over even to Colombo and the South. When the Army retook Vadamaradchy and Thenmaradchy, evacuees in those areas started trickling back to their homes in May 1996, many to find their homes either destroyed or with nothing left. St. John's was reopened in May with about 200 students and 25 staff. During my visit to Jaffna with the Bishop of Colombo and others in June 1996, there were 500 students and 40 teachers. A Civil engineer estimated the cost of repairing the damage around Rs 5 million. The replacement of the lost and damaged equipment was estimated to cost another Rs 3 m. Our plans to stay with the Principal of St. John's did not materialise as the bungalow was un-occupiable.

Even by this time, repair work had started mainly by replacing the tiles to protect the contents of buildings from the weather. Old tiles were available in the market from buildings completely destroyed. A few of the buildings, like the vice Principal's bungalow are too old and may not warrant the expenditure to repair. But the others have to be repaired. The Government has promised help and has provided cement and asbestos roofing from time to time and repair work is making slow progress.

There is a feeling among old boys that money should not be spent on repairing or re-building till normalcy and peace are restored as there is no guarantee that they will not be damaged again. This point was raised in 1988 when as Principal, I appealed to Old Boys for funds to repair and rebuild after the devastation by the Indian Army. We still went ahead and managed to raise around Rs 4m and not only to repair but even put up a three storey Science Complex with six laboratories and 12 class rooms. We were damaged again as many had feared. But those of you who know St. John's would have wept if you had been there in June 1996, as I had been, to see the state of the school. Therefore in this instance too, we feel that we should re-build and not run the school in the midst of ruins. I have been able to raise Rs 1.3 m from the British Government. which came in handy to repair the Jubilee Hall. But unlike in 1988 when we received assistance from other missions too, this time they would not help as they have all committed to go in with the Government to re-build Jaffna. The government too has promised help but their first priority would be their own schools. Some foreign assistance also has been promised.

My second visit to St. John's was in February 1997. At that time we had about 1 200 students (normal 1 600) and 55 teachers (normal 65). The others are caught up in the Wanni, unable to get back, or have migrated further South and may not return in the immediate future. Repairs are going on slowly as materials become available. I was able to stay in the principal's bungalow which had been made livable. The asbestos roof of Jubilee hall had been replaced. Generally things were getting back to some sort of normalcy. Sports meet had been held in February. Plans were afoot to re-start cricket by the second term. The College Magazine for 1995 and 1996 was published in March 1997, all printing done in Jaffna.

What was remarkable was that the people were happy to be back in their homes and re-start their shattered lives. Cost of living has come down drastically. Vegetables were about half the price in Colombo. Surprisingly coconuts which are selling at about Rs 12 - 15 in Colombo was only Rs 6 in Jaffna. Commodities that come from Colombo are more costly but not much more. Kerosene is available on ration through Co-ops at Rs 12.50 a litre and Rs 20 outside. Petrol is Rs 100 a litre (Colombo Rs 40) but hardly anyone is worrying about petrol, as all cars, three wheelers and motor cycles had been converted to run on kerosene and no one wants to change. Jaffna town gets electricity at varying times mostly in the night from about 7 pm to 11 pm. The voltage is very low but people are able to watch TV and use water pumps to fill up their overhead tanks. Children still depend on kerosene lamps for their study. Chundikuli Girl's College runs their generator for a few hostel girls as well as neighbourhood students who go there to do their study, sleep in the school and return home early next morning. St. John's uses their generator for the resident staff. The hostel is yet to re-open but plans are afoot to start soon. The British Government has promised to re-electrify Jaffna and work has already begun.

Army check points are all over and every one passing is checked for identity. The army has issued special identity cards for Jaffna residents. Life goes on regardless. I was able to visit my relatives in Chavakachcheri, Kopay and Earlalai, in a car without any problem.

Travel to and from Jaffna is much better than in the recent past. There is a civilian flight each day carrying about 50 passengers. In addition, three ships ply from Trincomalee to Jaffna each taking about 250 passengers. For travel, one must obtain a permit from the Ministry of Defence which may take as much as a month. The formalities and delays at Ratmalana and Palaly are cumbersome and passengers are treated like cattle, especially at Palaly. One has to report at the esplanade at 8 am for a flight that leaves Palaly at 4 pm. From the aircraft to and from the security zone in Palaly, passengers are transported by lorry. Since my last visit, I have written to the Ministry of Defence about the hardships of people and asking the Government to provide better facilities for passengers. The cost of a return flight is about Rs 6 500, almost the same as to Madras with hardly any facilities for passengers at either end.

Chundikuli Girls College

As Chairman of the Governing Body of CMS Schools, I have the overall responsibility for St. John's and Chundikuli, as well as for Ladies College, Colombo, Mowbray and Hillwood, Kandy. As the information given above will be read by many past pupils of Chundikuli also, I felt it my duty to give the latest on Chundikuli too. CGC celebrated their centenary in Colombo in February 1996, and a commemoration stamp was released to mark the occasion. In Jaffna, it was celebrated on 31 January 1997. Among other activities, they had an open air public meeting in the school at which I was to have presided but could not go as the Government clearance had not come in time. There were about 1 500 people at the Public meeting. The Centenary Souvenir is being produced by the PPA in Colombo. PPAs overseas who would like to have copies should get in touch with The President, Mrs Daisy Thevasagayam, 119/5A, Kynsey Road, Colombo 8, Tel; 686124.

Chundikuli was also damaged by the October 1995 operation but not as badly as St. John's. They also lost most of the equipment. The estimated cost of rebuilding and replacing equipment was about Rs 5 m. In June 1996, there were about 500 students and 30 teachers. By February 1997, numbers had risen to 1 000 students and 50 teachers. The school had been readied for the Centenary celebrations and looked impressive in February 1997, a sharp contrast to the scene in June 1996. A new open air stage had been constructed facing the playing field to commemorate the Centenary. Work has commenced to repair the badly damaged Thillampalam Block and the vice Principal's bungalow, both facing Old Park Road. The former should have been completed by now and the latter by the end of the year. They had their sports meet in February. Mr. Devanesan Nesiah who happened to be in Jaffna at that time was the chief guest at both Sports meets, CGC and St. John's.

As former Principal I can assure past pupils that the two schools continue to occupy a pre-eminent place among educational institutions in the country and undoubtedly the most sought

after in Jaffna. Academic excellence has been maintained at the highest levels, even during the most difficult days of 1995 and 1996. Our results at the A/L level and university admissions are second to none. We have to be especially thankful to the two principals and staff who have continued to serve faithfully under the most difficult, risky and trying circumstances. If we are to maintain these standards, it is up to us, the past pupils, to come forward to assist the schools in whatever way we can. Those of our kith and kin who have gone through so much suffering in the past ten years and lost loved ones and practically all their worldly possessions, reach out for our support. They look up to us, who have had the benefit of education in our two schools, and who have had the good fortune to have escaped the suffering and trauma of war, to keep the school flags flying high as ever.

As a past pupil ,a former teacher and Principal, and now as Chairman of the Governing Body, my appeal would be that we who have received so much from our schools should rise to the occasion to do all we can to our schools at a time of their greatest need.

Dr. E. S. Thevasagayam