

St. Andrew's Scots Kirk, Colombo.

22nd May, 2007

Our dear Friends,

Lankave kaemiti-de? is a question which we are often asked. It is important to Sri Lankans to know that those of us who have come from abroad enjoy the experience and like the people we meet. And we do! Having been here for three and a half years, we now have our favourite places to which we return when time allows and to which we introduce any visitors who come to spend some time with us - like the ancient rock fortress at Sigiriya, the tea estate bungalows at Haputale and Paradise Beach at Mirissa. As time passes and experiences are shared, our appreciation of our gifted Sri Lankan brothers and sisters at St. Andrew's grows. Most recently, we have shared Sri Lankan pride in its national cricket team which reached the final of the World Cup in Barbados. Had the weather been better and had the toss gone the other way, then we might have given the Kangaroos a closer game. *O Lankave kaemiti. Yes, we like Sri Lanka.*

There are things here which make us sad also. Perhaps, this is best illustrated by events on the night of the World Cup final. We had gone to the Swimming Club near St. Andrew's to watch the match on a big screen. Because of the delayed start and the prospect of worship early the next morning, we retired to bed long before the match began. About 2.30am, we were wakened up by lots of bangs and bumps. The sky was bright with lights. Had Sri Lanka managed to pull off the impossible and defeated Australia? Was this part of the celebrations? Very quickly, we could see that these were not fireworks but anti-aircraft cannon fire. The next day, we learned that the Tamil Tiger air force had launched an attack on two fuel installations in Colombo. It is this which brings our sense of sadness - the knowledge that there is a civil war going on. Only occasionally does it impinge upon our lives in Colombo, when there is a suicide bomb or an aerial attack. We are able to live in relative peace and safety here but in other parts of the country, many people live under a continual bombardment. Since the government committed itself to a military solution to the "ethnic conflict", around 300,000 people have had to leave their homes, some more than once; as many as 4,000 people including military personnel been killed and an estimated 1,000 people have been abducted. There is growing concern in the international community about the effect of the military solution on human rights. Recently, the British Government has withdrawn its development aid since it sees that no real development can happen without a political solution.

The effects of the conflict do make their presence known in other ways in Colombo. We see the soldiers and sailors who have been wounded in the conflict going about on crutches, recovering from their wounds. There is very high number of security checkpoints so that our car may be stopped several times in the course of a short journey. There are always long queues outside foreign embassies and high commissions made up from people who have decided to try and begin a new life elsewhere. There are empty hotels where potential foreign guests have decided to give Sri Lanka a miss this year. And we hear of many journalists being abducted and killed. We try not to get used to these facts of life.

One of the wonderful things about the Sri Lankan cricket team is that it is made up of Sinhalese and Tamils, Buddhists and Hindus, Moors and Christians. When they arrived home to a heroes' welcome after the World Cup, each of their religious faiths was recognised in the welcome ceremony. Here at St. Andrew's, we offer our contribution to the alternative approach in our own small way. As well as being "International and Interdenominational", we are a neutral sanctuary in a time of tension and conflict. By our ministry with and through local Christians, we seek to help those who have come from abroad, to visit or to work, to be able to say "*Lankave kaemiti!*"

John and Patricia Purves.