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# VOICE OF THE VOICELESS

BULLETIN OF THE COORDINATING SECRETARIAT  
FOR PLANTATION AREAS

*CSPA Statement*

## *PEACE ACCORD*

*The member organizations of the Coordinating Secretariat for Plantation Areas, Kandy, warmly welcome the Peace Accord signed in Colombo on 29 July 1987 by President J R. Jayewardene and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.*

*The Secretariat has consistently supported the idea that ours is a plural society in which all the various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups should live together in mutual peace and understanding in a united Sri Lankan nation. The Secretariat believes that the Peace Accord of 29 July will long be remembered as a historic accord that, without denying separate identities, yet transcended them and began the process of building a common Sri Lankan consciousness.*

*The plantation people, be they Tamils, Sinhalese or Muslims, have much to gain from the Peace Accord. They long understood that their future in the plantation areas lies in unity and in the peace and justice that are the results of unity. They should now set their face firmly against all divisive tendencies. In their relationships with one another, they should so act that Sri Lanka may be, to quote the Peace Accord, "a plural society in which all citizens can live in equality, safety and harmony and prosper and fulfil their aspirations." This is also the ultimate goal of the Coordinating Secretariat for Plantation Areas.*

**Paul Caspersz**

*Coordinator*

*Kandy 3rd August 1987*

**Ranjit de Silva**

*Secretary*

## MIRJE Statement

### THE ACCORD TO END THE ETHNIC CONFLICT

The Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) welcomes the Accord entered into by the government of Sri Lanka and India in order to bring to an end the ethnic conflict that has ravaged this country during the past decade.

The total lack of trust and confidence between the government on the one hand and the Tamil people and the militant organisations on the other has prevented any serious negotiation between them since 1985 and it was probably only an accord of this nature that could have brought the country out of this impasse.

The accord is in the nature of compromise and may not entirely satisfy the parties to the conflict. However, it does promise the end of violence and the restoration of democratic rights to the Tamil people through a pattern of devolution that recognises their right to self-governance in the area they inhabit, a right that MIRJE has consistently campaigned for. In this sense the accord does go far towards resolving one of the issues basic to the conflict.

MIRJE has also consistently upheld the view that Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic society and that each ethnic group possesses its own distinct cultural and linguistic identity, even in the face of chauvinist hysteria that sought to identify Sri Lanka as a Sinhala-Buddhist society. MIRJE is therefore glad that a recognition of this reality is one of the basic features of the accord.

The chauvinist hysteria that attempted to deny to the Tamil people their collective rights has manifested itself again during the past week. To these misguided persons MIRJE can only say that attempts to wreck the accord will inevitably lead to separation. Only the recognition of the multi-ethnic nature of our society and the creation of political structures in which the different ethnic groups can nurture their own collective identity can preserve the unity of Sri Lanka and lead hopefully to the eventual creation of an over-arching Sri Lanka identity.

They must also note that the failure of a society to resolve its own internal contradictions can be fatal to its continued independence. Agreements to resolve the issue have had an unfortunate history in the past. MIRJE hopes and expects that this accord will not meet with the same fate. To that end all parties to the conflict must

implement this accord in good faith. MIRJE therefore calls upon the state and the Tamil militant groups to implement the accord in this spirit resolving many of the problems that are bound to arise in the course of implementation through negotiations and calls upon all citizens of Sri Lanka to assist in this process.

Charles Abeysekera  
President (MIRJE)

04/08/87

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## HOUSE OF DETENTION AND REPATRIATION TO INDIA

After the British conquest of Sri Lanka it was Governor Barnes who first encouraged the establishment of coffee plantations on a commercial scale in the island. In the 1820s and the 1830s coffee was king in the European market, and the colonisers, including army officers and administrative officials of the British East India Company cut down virgin jungles in the hill-country and planted coffee in the cleared lands.

However, the pioneer European planters had to confront the problem of labour for their plantations since the Kandyan Sinhalese peasants were not only tended to be hostile to the foreigners but, being engaged with their agricultural pursuits, were averse to perform arduous tasks in the coffee lands. In this situation, unable to secure labour from any other source, the planters brought down labourers from the neighbouring sub-continent of India making all kinds of empty promises to them.

On the basis of semi-slave labour of the Indian immigrant labourers the coffee plantations flourished.

In the early period before the introduction of railways, the immigrants had to walk about 200 miles through wild jungles along the infamous North Road to reach the coffee estates lodged in the up-country hills. Ill-equipped for this perilous journey thousands of them perished even before they reached the estates.

Coffee was a seasonal crop and there was a heavy influx of these labourers during the plucking seasons. Once the seasonal work came to an end large proportions of them returned to their villages in India. This was the pattern of immigration and emigration we observe during the coffee period.

In the 1880s when the coffee industry collapsed as a result of a fungus attack enterprising planters began the large scale cultivation of tea. Tea, a hardy plant, thrived splendidly especially in the cooler atmosphere of the hill-country but, unlike coffee, tea required a permanent labour force since there was work throughout the year. To meet this new requirement the planters organised immigration on a large scale and this led to the founding of families and permanent settlement of Indian immigrants on the estates.

With the development of tea and rubber at the turn of the century great fortunes were made on the basis of the maximum exploitation of the immigrant workers. While the British planters lived in palatial bungalows surrounded by beautiful flower gardens and fruit trees the creators of this El-Dorado for the planters lived in unhygienic and ill-ventilated hovels called line rooms.

Be that as it may, with the new environment in the estates and large scale permanent settlement of immigrants a new problem arose for the planters. Unlike in the coffee period when seasonal work was over they merely discharged the surplus labourers who returned to India, with the growth of tea and permanent settlement of workers this simple method could no longer be applied without objections from the workers. In this new situation disabled and worn-out workers preferred to stay on and perish in the estates rather than embark upon a tedious journey to India often to die there. The problem became more accentuated since the planters wanted to get rid of unwanted and aged workers in order to provide accommodation in the line rooms for a fresh batch of workers. The planters, therefore, devised their own schemes to force disabled and other surplus labour back into India. Thus the British planters made India both a reservoir of cheap labour and a dumping ground for senile, disabled labour unwanted in the plantation in their colonies.

### Destitutes and the House of Detention

The workers, who had been robbed of the best years of their lives found it impossible to live on the estates. The earnings of their sons and daughters were utterly insufficient to support them. Most aged workers were conscious that they were a drag, a burden upon their children. Under pressure from the Superintendents these unwanted workers often left the estates and begged their way into the towns. The once sturdy men, whose vitality raised the plantations for the welfare of the planters raj, became destitutes begging for mere survival,

and many towns became crowded with such paupers. The capital city of Colombo was indeed a Mecca for these people and they flocked to this city in large numbers to eke out a bare living.

To solve this problem the government appointed a Commission on the homeless vagrants in Colombo, and this led to the establishment of the House of Detention which served as a repatriation transit depot.

One midnight in February 1906 the city of Colombo was subjected to a sudden and unprecedented raid; people in the streets in certain areas were combed out and inspected. The inspection was carried out under the direction of W. Marshall Philip, the city's Medical Officer of Health. By 3 a.m. the whole operation was over and the facts collected formed the basis of the first Census of Vagrants in Colombo. 675 vagrants had been counted out and all but 12 were Indian immigrants.

Phillip submitted his findings to the Chairman of the Municipal Council. It stated: "There is a large population of homeless vagrants almost entirely immigrant Tamils brought over from India as estate coolies, and were either discharged as physically unfit, and after being dumped by their kanganies in Colombo were left sick, penniless, and helpless to fend for themselves, or in some cases they admitted having deserted from the estates".<sup>1</sup>

The city coroner M. Francis L. Daniel too had no doubt about the origin of the vagrants. He said: "As to the origin of this floating population...I feel convinced that they are from the coolie population".<sup>2</sup>

The aged and destitute workers had drifted to Colombo but their chances of survival there were even more hopeless than in the plantation areas. Apart from starvation the dirt and the foul atmosphere seriously endangered the health of these people. Chekkul Street and Pettah—frequented by the destitutes—were some of the filthiest places in Colombo. Of their fate the Medical Officer of Health wrote: "What little money they make is frequently stolen from them at night. In their ill-nourished sickly condition they are ill able to withstand the exposure to rain and wind and filth, and rapidly fall victims to respiratory, diarrhoea and other diseases. When no longer able to beg, these unfortunates find their way into hospitals, where they overcrowd the pauper wards and die in large numbers."<sup>3</sup>

1. Sessional Paper XLIX—1906 (Report on Homeless Vagrants) p.14
2. *ibid.* p. 17
3. *ibid.* p. 14

The Salvation Army and the Friend in need Societies could little help these westrels. So the Commission on Homeless Vagrants in Colombo proposed (a) "the establishment of houses of detention; (b) the provision of a special pauper hospital at Ragama; and (c) the co-operation of the Planters Association in regard to the coolies who are incapacitated for labour, so as to secure their proper care and in some cases repatriation to India".

The House of Detention was soon established in Colombo, and immigrants were repatriated under Ordinances 5 and 12 of 1907. On being certified by a Magistrate an indigent immigrant as a vagrant could be deported to India. Pauperised workers were rounded up in the towns and repatriated by the police through the House of Detention. It would have been more in accord with its function if this institution were called the "House of Disposal."

— S. Nadesan

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## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES—PLANTATION WORKER

What commodity of trade was this  
Bartered for a few pence  
Their bodies and their souls  
Forfeit to an empire  
They knew nothing of,  
A ruler like some distant  
God whom they must needs placate  
With death and sacrifice,  
His emissaries some daemonic force  
Which monthly claimed its dues  
—Their all—so much must go  
For bowl of rice, the largest  
Roughest grain boiling in cauldrons  
For their food, sleeping in lines  
The dormitories of the quick and dead  
Wrapped in their winding sheets,  
Which sage emerged to interpret  
Their dreams or touch their startled  
Cries of fear in sleep, waking in misty  
Dawns that chilled their naked breath  
On rearing hills; unending debts  
Buzzed about their ears in hornet swarms  
Book, after book, page after page  
Totalling the sum of their small lives

And deeds; cumblies, rough blankets  
Hood their bodies, to protect them  
From the cold mists so that their fingers  
Unending pluck the bud and leaf  
Conjured into minted coins.  
Their bodies, sweated in fevers  
Or retched and purged dehydrate with choleras  
Ravaged by small pox, choked with phlegm  
And rheum, they coughed up blood  
Spewing out their lives, or tied  
Against the rangi thoon, they felt  
The lash upon recalcitrant flesh,  
They came along death trails  
Their bodies prey for leopard  
And for bear, passing the forest saw  
The demons beckon from the dark.  
An empire in their baskets  
Carried on their backs  
Their lives weighed out in leaf  
Their souls bartered for a coin.

Jean Arasanayagam

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Short story by A. P. V. Gomes

### IS IT FATE?

At the entrance to the house, that is on either side of the gate, two plantain trees were planted. Garlands of fresh jasmine were hung here and there. They had decorated the entire house with flowers that attracted the eyes of everyone who entered the house. Yes, it was the day when the handsome bridegroom was to accept the beautiful bride as his better half and his partner through life.

It was a huge bungalow which announced that people who lived there were from the higher strata of the social ladder. There was a huge pandal erected warmly welcoming all those sophisticated crowds who were invited. The whole area was illuminated by multi-coloured bulbs which were switched on even during daytime. There ruled pomp and power. The loudspeaker was at its loudest tone broadcasting a film song ...

“All should live ... This world should be drenched in pleasure”, were the words that came through the loudspeaker. How nice an idea it is. We should all accept this idea with great pleasure. Isn't it? I hope you would all accept it. But all those who were gathered there were not even listening to the music. If so, could we say that they were reflecting on the words? No, surely not!

There were so many people walking up and down, here and there. Trays were carried and glasses were lifted from those trays. Pieces of cake were taken from some other trays ... yes, the wedding cake which the invitees never would miss at a wedding house.

Those present chattered, laughed, smiled and danced. Everyone present there had forgotten the worries and defeats of life. Thus it was a world of fantasy and frolic.

“Welcome”. This was the sign that was attractively drawn on a beautiful background. Was this to invite all those who came to the entrance of that bungalow? Or was it just a token sign...?

There came a poor woman. Her hair was not combed. Surely it had not seen the oil for so many days, if not months. Her eyes had gone deep into their sockets. Her face was bony and she was lean and hungry-looking. By her side was a small boy about the age of ten. He was dirty. His clothes had attained the state where they would not even burn if thrown into fire. His hair was dry, yellowish brown in colour. The difference between the children in that bungalow and this child was ... Oh, we cannot even imagine it.

Some other song was heard over the loudspeaker. “All the people are equal and only one God rules this land” were the words that struck my ears.

The boy was about to cry. He went near his mother. “Mother, see there—balloons, balloons. Oh, how many balloons. Mother, get me one, will you”. The child began to weep. He became obstinate.

Yes, there were hundreds of balloons. The children who were playing in the bungalow garden were having four or five balloons each in their hands.

This mother also was a mother. Isn't it? Naturally she too had love for her son. Her affection and her feelings overcame her. She went near the pandal. There were multi-coloured balloons hanging



or rather dancing in the breeze. Red, blue, yellow, green ... She placed her hand on the green. The balloon was in her hand now. With affection and tender love she handed it over to her son, who was stretching out his hand ...

You should have seen the face of that boy at that time. It brightened, lit up to glory, a wide smile spread on it. The loudspeaker was singing a new song "God has come in the form of a small child..." It suited the occasion well and true.

The next moment a rough and strong arm attacked the child's back. He was shocked. He was stunned. He fell face downwards. The balloon that got caught under his chest burst with a loud sound.

"Chee ... dirty son of a filthy bitch. Who asked you to take the balloon which was splendidly hanging there? You bastard". The rough hand was raised with a grunt and a growl. But now it was towards the mother whose heart was burning with tender love and affection. At that time the child got up. There was sand on his face. There was a small piece of the rubber balloon on his chest.

The person who hit the mother even removed the piece of balloon that was on the boy's chest. He shouted "Bastards". He went inside. At that time ...

A servant who was carrying a huge basin of left overs, dumped it into the drum that was in front of the house on the other side of the road. The drum overflowed. Many dogs came running towards the food.

The mother and son forgot all that had happened. They ran towards the drum ... shouting "shoo...shoo..." at the dogs. What would happen there? We cannot say. Who knows?

"All should live. The world should be happy". The famous song was heard over the loudspeaker.

Yes ... it was a sweet song. But ...

## THIRTEEN YEARS OF THE CSPA

*On 17 October 1987 the CSPA will be thirteen years old. For the record, we are here publishing for the first time the letter of invitation to the Consultation of 17 October 1974. It was at the end of that Consultation, and as its main out-come, that the CSPA was set up.*

Satyodaya Centre for Social Research & Encounter  
11/2, (now 30) Pushpadana Mawatha, Kandy.  
30.9.74

### PLANTATION WORKERS CONSULTATION: 17 OCTOBER

Dear

The many voluntary organizations and persons concerned about the plantation workers (and the allied situation of the dispossessed peasants) have now reached a stage where coordination of their efforts is essential.

With this coordination in view, two representatives of your group are invited to attend a Consultation on Thursday, 17 October (a public holiday), 10 a.m. (on the dot) to 5.30 p.m., at the Catechetical Centre, St Anthony's Cathedral, Kandy. Fr. Vianney Fernando, Vicar General of Kandy, and the C. W. F. will be your hosts to lunch and tea.

For the success of the Consultation, please bear in mind its clear goal: coordination of efforts and the setting up of a central coordinating body.

The Consultation will start with one representative of each group present being allowed (only) 10 minutes each to report on

- (1) the nature of its involvement in the matter under discussion;
- (2) what it thinks should and could be done through coordinated effort;
- (3) the extent that it is prepared to commit itself to further coordinated action in terms of (a) personnel and time and  
(b) finance.

It will be very useful for each group to meet locally and separately before the 17th in order to brief its representatives at the Consultation. All proceedings will be in English.

In order that we may know the exact number for lunch, please send me before 10 October the names of the representative you will send to the Consultation.

Each one will then be given a lunch ticket upon arrival.

Yours in comradeship,

Sgd:

Paul Caspersz (Convenor)

copies to bishops Perera, Deogupillai, Wickremasinghe, Nanayakkara, Frs. Vianney Fernando (Estate Distress Relief), T. Pieris, John Isaac, Joe Mary (Christian Life Communities, Trinco), Pio Ciampa (Estates Services), Edith Bond, (War on Want), C.W.F., Setik (Kandy), N.C.C. Oxfam, Marxist-Christian Dialogue, Lal Wijenaike (Society in Defence of Estate Workers' Human Rights), SCI, Outlook, Sedec, CWM, National Committee for International Women's Year, A. R. Rajendram (Kandy Diocesan Relief Committee), Association for National Unity, Community Food Production Project (Satyodaya, Kandy), CLC (Colombo), Centre for Society & Religion etc.

N.B. If you are aware of any other concerned group, please let us know by return, so that a notice of this Consultation may be sent to them too.

**We regret the Article**  
**"Plantation workers and peace accord" by**  
**M. C. A. Alles and Y. Ranasinghe Rajapakse**  
**could not be included in this issue of the**  
**"VOICE OF THE VOICELESS".**  
**It will appear in the next issue.**

## PRINTED MATTER



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