

# A pension for the Blind

Many people who are blind or visually impaired live with their family members without any means of self-support. They have no employment and therefore no income whatsoever. The unemployment rate of the blind in this country is at an all-time high - over 95 percent. They are below the poverty level, not because they do not like to work but that we are not considered employable. Even among the employed, many have jobs but their income is woefully insufficient.

The authorities concerned are just not interested in the well-being of the blind community. Government programmes and services are all geared to benefit the population with sight while the blind are discriminated against.

Today the whole country is talking about the Tokyo conference and the aid promised by the donor countries. The government has promised salary increases to government employees but no relief to the blind who like to work but are not given the opportunity to do so. The fact is that there are fewer blind people makes it easy for our politicians to ignore the blind. At the same time our policy makers have no clearcut agenda to ensure that the benefits trickle down to the grassroots - the blind and the disabled.

Herewith we put forward for the incorporation into a Social Security Act with a welfare and public assistance programme to benefit the blind. We seek protection against unem-

ployment and security against destitution. With the passage of this Act, public welfare and provision, job opportunity will become a national concern. Here there is not just the money and the financial independence and security: Actively working and being productive provide a sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

Blind Citizens Front is determined to see that the blind are heard. We ask the present government what specific steps it has to protect the livelihood and the democratic rights of the blind and the disabled community.

M. C. Jayasiri

## Sri Lanka, a rapists' paradise

I allude to your editorial comments on July 17, 2003 under the caption 'Save women and children'. Reference has been made therein to one of your own news reports that appeared on 19.01.2003 relating to some rape statistics in Sri Lanka.

Thus, according to police, there have been 1200 recorded rape cases in the first eleven months of the year 2002. I am sure, in the month of December that year too there must have been extra such instances bringing the number to 1200 plus for the year. The statistics for the previous two years are 1181 and 1154 respectively. These are undoubtedly only the reported cases. As to how many such unreported and unrecorded cases there are, your guess is as good as mine.

Thus, it appears that our national average is somewhere above 1200 per year which computes to over a hundred per month. This is by no means a poor figure for a third world developing country like ours. Our national performance in this regard is quite impressive indeed.

Now, turn the pages of the same newspaper in which the said editorial comments appeared on July 17, 2003. On page 3, there is a screaming headline 'Twelve

years RI for rape of 13-year-old girl'. It says that this offender from Keselwatta in Colombo has taken the girl to Kalutara for his horrid operation. But earlier complaints on six occasions by the victim girl's blind mother to the Keselwatta police station had not even been recorded, the report says.

Now, proceed on to the next page, namely, page 4 of the same newspaper. What glares in my eye is the headline 'Daughters raped'. Here, it is stated that two daughters of a farmer in Ambalantota have been raped by a gang on the instructions of a cattle owner who had been compelled to pay compensation to the farmer whose crops had been damaged by the cattle.

These and other similar reports together with the statistics quoted above make me wonder whether we have become a nation of rapists because our performances in this regard have been quite remarkable. So, it is worth probing if we can obtain a location with regard to rape in the Guinness book of records.

Dharmapala Senaratne  
Gothatuwa New Town

## Dr. Corea's plight

It was indeed heartening to read in 'The Island' that Dr. Gamani Corea had participated in the gathering of the Royal College over 70 year OBU meeting this month. I am writing as a long-standing friend of Dr. Corea, having known and associated with him over several decades. Another friend who visited Dr. Corea recently told me that Dr. Corea complained that he felt very lonely and would like to see more of his friends. He also informed me that on the day of his visit there was only one other person who had come by car had seen Dr. Corea.

The conclusion is inescapable that someone is responsible for keeping Dr. Corea's friends away from him. His frame of mind would certainly improve if he could keep company with his friends as he has done in the past. I was also told that although there are a large number of security guards in the premises keeping a watchful eye, the premises is in a state of neglect. He noticed cobwebs in the ceiling, the verandah unswept, heaps of rubbish in the garden on the left hand side and the flower pots not watered. I have myself visited Dr. Corea more than forty times in his residence at Horton Place in the last few years and when I heard this I was very shocked and surprised, knowing fully well that Dr. Corea always maintained his residence in excellent condition.

A close and long-standing friend

## Death penalty and religion

Most Buddhists who are opposed to the death penalty seem to lean heavily on Buddhism to support their arguments and quote the Buddha word, Dhammapada stanzas etc. Let us all remember that Buddhism or any religion for that matter has nothing to do with the DP which is a punishment prescribed in law for premeditated murder and for certain other crimes too in certain countries and is a matter for the rulers to decide unless the people are called upon to take a decision at a referendum.

The fact that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist majority country and Buddhism advocates compassion does not mean that we must necessarily oppose the DP if that is part of the

law. We cannot forget that there were more stringent, harsher and what may be called degrading punishment during the time of Sinhala kings when a larger majority of the population comprised Buddhists with only some Hindus who were also closely associated with Buddhism, Buddhist temples, the Sangha and the king. The people were then more attached to the religion and led a life far more in keeping with Buddhist ideals. Like the Buddha the Sangha refrained from interfering with the administration of justice by the king, his ministers and officials because they knew that religion should not be mixed up with state craft.

In a letter to the *Daily News* one reader had

quoted the Dhammapada stanza *Sabbe tasanti dandassa...* to plead on behalf of the murderer and save him from the gallows, conveniently forgetting that it cuts both ways in that the fear of punishment and death is felt by the murder victim as well and one can quote the same stanza on behalf of the victim as against the murderer.

It is best not to seek mercy for criminal on grounds of religion. These opposed to the DP and anxious to plead on behalf of the criminal must find other grounds for their arguments.

If the Parliament cannot take a decision on the issue, the best it can do is to invite the people to take a final decision at a referendum.

S. Abeywickrama

## Marketing paddy

The Minister of Finance speaking at a recent meeting of a joint chambers of commerce has indicated the government no longer believes in subsidising agriculture or for that matter being the main player in the furtherance of agrarian matters. He encourages the private sector to take on that role with generous concessions offered to them in the form of low interest loans, tax incentives, etc.

The Minister of Agriculture in the meantime points out the need to continue with subsidies and state assistance until such time the producers are strong enough to stand on their own.

Farmers complain of their inability to sell even the last Maha crop at a reasonable price to recover costs.

Are we in a period of transition? Or are we at an impasse? If government's intention is to expect market forces to determine the future of Sri Lankan grown paddy while undermining its value by strategic imports from time to time and if the Ministry of Agriculture is unable to guarantee a reasonable price to the farmer where do the producers stand? At the loop end of a rope attached to a branch?

More than any in recent history this administration is beholden to farmers who

responded with record harvests in response to its exhortations. It just isn't done to let them down. Somebody at the very top must make a firm decision to resolve this problem of paddy marketing with the same amount of enthusiasm shown to the industrial sector.

70 percent of the population still engaged in agriculture will stand by the Minister of Agriculture whose roots are deep in a traditional food growing region as against the urban based theorists who have little in common with actual producers of the food they must necessarily consume to survive, yet unfortunately have the clout to decide on the future of more than half the population of this country.

The three insurrections Sri Lanka has seen since independence have been of rural origin. But the metropolitan based ruling elite tragically do not seem to still grasp that a fair price for 70 percent of the agricultural producers of this nation is a necessity for sheer survival. To please 30 percent of their kind at the expense of the larger majority, to say the least, is illogical. I wonder whether they care.

Milroy Ratwatte  
Badilla

## Don't meddle with road names

Further to the letter appearing in *The Island* of 14.7.03 by P. S. Wickramasuriya who objects to the change of name of Kotugodella Veediya, I wish to state that on no account should names of roads be changed as it inconveniences the residents as well as visitors.

When the name of my road was changed for no reason, I informed the CEB, Telecom, Water Board, friends, relations, banks etc; as I feared that my letters may not be delivered. This was bad enough but the CEB, Telecom and Water Board wanted proof of the change of name. I had to go several times to the Municipal Council to get this. I was made to wait several hours each day and finally told that it would be posted to me.

It is ridiculous to replace names with meaning (eg. Hospital Road, Hill Street). These names at Dehiwala were replaced with names of people each having five words, too long to be written on a small envelope. It looks as if in the not too distant future all roads in Sri Lanka will have peoples' names!

I hope all MCs and UCs will understand and stop this unnecessary exercise. If they really want to do something, should do something to benefit the people, how about removing the roadside garbage and repairing the roads for which everyone will say thank you.

S. Perera

## The Railway in Sri Lanka

The British laid the railway network and handed to us the management after Independence, over 50 years ago. Since then we have not expanded the network or improved the system or service in keeping to suit our commuter needs that have grown many fold today. In the early 50's the railway had a much lesser work force. The total labour force would have been a few thousand workers. With this small labour force, the rail tracks were cleaned regularly and were free of any weeds or grass. Bad sleepers were replaced in time and there was good maintenance all round. The trains had 1st, 2nd and 3rd class compartments priced accordingly.

Due to political expediency of the day, we did away with this class system, thereby denying the railway the revenue which it could have earned otherwise. Having shut the door for the railway to make money, today they wonder why the railway is running at a loss. The world over let it be plane, train, ship, cinema or hotel, comforts are sold at a premium price, that constitute the bulk revenue for the institution.

Thanks to our short sighted politicians we have killed the railway. They have increased the labour force over 500 percent with unproductive labour, playing politics and have brought the railway to a virtual halt. Today the tracks are covered with weeds and grass, and

in some places the rails cannot be seen. There is absolute mismanagement with overstaffing whereas in the past with a smaller labour force the tracks were cleaned and well maintained and it was safe to travel by train. I do not know, how many are aware of the condition of the track network. In Peradeniya, to visit a relative of mine, I take a short cut along the rail track on the main Colombo-Kandy line. The condition of the track is so bad that I had given up travelling by train long before the Rambukkana tragedy. I pity the unsuspecting commuters who gamble with their lives daily travelling in our trains, till the next tragedy which may not be far off.

The British when they designed the railway network and the stations, left land as reservation for adding extra lines where possible and to expand stations later for development. Our clever politicians have allowed squatters on reservations along rail tracks for a few thousand votes and have sold parts of railway yards adjacent to main stations for personal benefit. Comparatively, the damage caused to this country by our own so-called patriotic workers and politicians, far out weigh the ills of the British who had some love for this country.

G. Dullewe  
Colombo

Contributors to are advised to retain copies of their articles as well as photographs sent for publication. We regret our inability to return such articles/photographs.

—Editor

## Prepare for the worst

Well here we go again... the LTTE has once again changed its fragile mind, which changes when a peace agreement is at hand. They have decided that the Peace Agenda needs to be redefined? I wonder when will this process end. This peace process of ours has a parallel in the Israel/Palestine conflict. It too keeps on dragging with no settlement in sight. The present Government of Prime Minister, Ranil Wicramasinghe is worthy of the highest credit, for having offered more towards solving this problem than any other government did and sad as it is, it is running out of options. It appears that the LTTE cannot be satisfied. As long as the LTTE maintains this negative attitude nothing positive will ever come out of any negotiations and a permanent solution is very unlikely.

There is substantial assurances from persons in authority that though the Peace Process is on hold, the LTTE has promised not to engage in war once again, but the age old belief that promises are meant to be broken holds good in this case too. Can someone justify why the LTTE is involved in gun-running operations? Believe me I am not making any suggestions or creating any suspicion that the

LTTE is preparing to embark on some sort of a clandestine activity. There are, of course, certain very simple possibilities why the LTTE is smuggling arms. Could be that Prabhakaran is making arrangements to hold an Arms Exhibition and needs to have a variety of weapons for the purpose or that is just getting these for his own personal collection? There are several other possibilities as well. Anyhow, in my opinion, the matter needs serious investigation. To me, it looks like the LTTE is quietly stockpiling its armoury? Why are they doing this? If you are good at guessing, then draw your own conclusions!

The Prime Minister seems to be very confident that the LTTE will honour their side of the bargain and pave the way to resolve the present crisis. This is no doubt the hope of each and every peace-loving citizen of our country. It's my sincere wish to remind him that, it is good to hope for the best, but do not leave the very important fact out and that is to be prepared for the worst. Just for the record let us not forget that four previous peace bids failed and the result was bloodshed! Well there we go again...

Brian Hingert,

## Ombudsman

### SLTB buses avoiding Ambalangoda bus station

After the new spacious central bus station was opened in 1998, August, alongside the 'Super Market Complex' constructed by the UDA under an ADB loan of Rs. 40 million, SLTB buses from the 'Ruhunu Depot' (Route No. 02) have not been picking up commuters to Colombo from the bus bay at the new central bus stand.

The new bus station has two queues for Colombo commuters. One queue is named as "Colombo AC." and the other as "Colombo Ordinary". But, it is observed that no ordinary SLTB buses from Galle and beyond, call over at this Colombo queue to pick up passengers.

A large number of passengers hang around for long hours for want of regular buses to Kalutara, Panadura and beyond. It is observed that only private buses starting from Ambalangoda stop there. The intervals are far between unlike formerly when SLTB buses used to come in almost every 15 minutes.

Now, we have all the SLTB and private buses coming from Galle, Matara, Tangalla, Hambantota and Kataragama stopping at the "Express" bus Halt opposite the People's Bank, along Galle road, about 500 meters away from the Central Bus station. I presume this express bus halt is provided for the private AC coaches and the private buses coming from the South to pick up commuters.

The commuters from Ambalangoda travelling towards Colombo never get seats due to this problem. Even the few SLTB buses allotted to Ambalangoda Depot, proceed to Galle and then start their journey to Colombo full of passengers from Galle.

The Minister of State Transport should look into this problem immediately and provide some relief to the commuters travelling to Kalutara and beyond.

L. Lekamwasam Leaname  
Ambalangoda