

# Rumpus on the Jaffna campus

J.S. Tissainayagam in Jaffna

entering the campus of the Jaffna University one feels a tinge of disappointment.

It does not have the majestic grandeur of Peradeniya with its verdant terraces leading up to the halls of the bourgeoisie in bloom and the sprawling buildings, it does not have the modern structures of Ruhuna University washed by the sea spray and the evenings silhouetted against the vermilion sky.

Jaffna University was Parameshwara College and is with a tiny playing field choked by uneven outcrops of thick grass, unpretentious buildings and no great beauty.

The evenings the campus stands forlorn and desolate like the universities in the South which are enlivened by its lustrous boozed parties in the boys' halls here under the friendly seclusion of the giant trees keep their trysts.

For all that, if there is any institution in Jaffna the pulse of a nation, a community, can be felt it is the Jaffna campus. Within that microcosm, the rising and despair of the youth of Jaffna is reflected at the same time slow and tentative steps are taken by both students and academics to analyse and explain the terrorised, turbulent and blood-soaked life of the Jaffna Tamil.

## IPKF presence

The General Body of the Jaffna University Union last week. They had been newly elected and which was allowed to have elected representatives after four years. It is itself a major step by the Government which banned all elected bodies since 1984, an act roundly claimed to be the causes of student unrest and violence against

six students present from the General body had acted to the unions of their respective faculties by undergraduates of those faculties and who together with the General body. Their office was only two

weeks old, and they seemed enthusiastic on using it as a vehicle to win student rights and privileges.

Life in Jaffna is full by the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. What is but a political issue in the south is a hard, brutal reality up there. The public is trying desperately to adjust itself to the IPKF presence and if there is any part of that public which feels particularly vulnerable to the IPKF it is the students. So it was natural that conversation should have turned towards the IPKF.

## 2 students killed by IPKF

Two university students were killed when troops of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force opened fire at a group of students demonstrating against the killing by the IPKF of Mr. Shanmugalingam, a teacher at a shoot-out at Jaffna Hindu College.

"The Indians hate us from the time they lost 29 men during the beginning of Operation Pawan," said one referring to the drop of paratroopers near the Jaffna University Medical Faculty during which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam snipers were able to pick them off at will, in what is regarded as one of the major blunders of the Indian army. Undergraduates feel that from then on the IPKF regarded them as potential enemies and earmarked them for destruction.

However a senior academic who did not wish to be identified (any interview on the campus begins with a peremptory, "Don't quote me") said that this was not so. He said that after the cleaning up of the Tiger hideouts in the area, the Indians had been keen on reopening the campus as at least an exercise in PR.

But the gesture was fruitless. The LTTE resistance continued. On various instances students with LTTE

links were arrested. It was then that the IPKF really turned their guns against the undergraduates and their teachers. They felt the campus had become a sanctuary and clandestine arsenal for the LTTE. It became identified as a centre of anti-Indian resistance.

At an average, three students are arrested every week. Students complain that though they are given a university identity card that the last thing they produce when checked by the IPKF is the card. The Indian soldiers are supposed to have a psychotic aversion to the undergraduates and take them in merely because of their status.

The students said that when Thavarajah had been arrested late last year the campus had fairly bristled with indignation. In spite of the severe risks involved the students had picketed near the IPKF camp. The IPKF had threatened to shoot, but restrained themselves. Those tense and volatile moments resulted in Brigadier R.S. Kablon, the IPKF town commandant in Jaffna and Brigadier Sardesh Pandic announcing that hence forth all arrests of university students would be followed by prompt information to the university.

But unfortunately this had not been happening. Students still get arrested and the word of one's argal reaches only if he has a travelling companion or if they are reported missing by parents. Also students could be arrested in any of the campuses in the peninsula. This makes information coming through difficult.

While I was speaking to the undergraduates, a message arrived that a Science Faculty student had been arrested. I thought that the whole thing was staged, but apparently it was not. At once the students present began to disperse to get the machinery for his release into operation.

## No consideration

The machinery is usually for the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of the faculty from which the student was arrested to visit the camp, identify the student, establish his bona fides and try to secure his release. The dons, more used to the quiet of their book-lined studies and strenuous academic pursuits, relate with feeling, the experience they have undergone.

Even the IPKF top brass have no consideration for the dignity of the dons. "They tell you, 'You come about the students, how many of our men have been killed by the Tigers?'" said one who bears the brunt of the IPKF brutality regularly. The IPKF's anger stems from their belief that Tiger activity on the campus, such as the appearance of posters is done with the knowledge and tacit support of the staff.

The lecturers defend themselves by saying that they cannot be expected to know the political persuasion of all the students, and even if they did, there was nothing to prevent anybody from pasting posters at night. But he admitted that there was an excuse, for their suspicions about the campus.

On 22nd of November there was a cordon and search operation in the University hostel. This, though it nearly led to a confrontation did not fulfill the IPKF's objective - for a sub warden of the hostel, a suspected LTTE'er had made good his escape.

Recently however there is a new factor to the already 'tricky security situation'. Though the students were not willing to commit themselves on the issue, a don told me that informers were responsible in betraying students as Tiger suspects to the IPKF. The fact that they moved so closely with the IPKF made it certain that they were members of the ruling party of the provincial council the EPRLF.

The students disclosed another irritant troubling them. The entire university they said, had accommodation only for 52 students. The student population totals



Trouble brewing: the IPKF in Jaffna

2,500. Though there are provisions to accommodate another 52 female students the buildings have not been completed. They said that 60% of their number came from outside the peninsula and even the rest came from areas so far away that, daily travel was impossible. This was compounded by the IPKF's local curfews and cordon and search operations, rendering travel hazardous. Most students take rooms in homes near the campus. But whereas students in the hostel pay only Rs. 45/- per term, it could be as high as Rs. 125/- in a private room, with the added discomfort of sharing it with another.

Faced by these problems, the undergraduates and the staff are looking for solutions. The formation of an elected students union has made the body by and large acceptable to most students. From my brief encounter, with them, they seemed non-partisan in their approach to solutions.

The students expressed a view that was contradictory to what most people in Jaffna were saying. They wanted

close ties with the universities of the south. The average Jaffna Tamil is indifferent to the political or any other development in the south. The general election in the offing leaves him unmoved and the provincial council elections has not devolved meaningful power to the region. But the students though non-committal on the election, thought that solidarity with other universities could be a source of political strength.

They confessed that the indifference of the southern students to their plight during the IPKF operation, which did not draw a word of sympathy, let alone a token strike, left them disillusioned about the southern response. But they are not too disheartened even though the ties with the Inter University Students Federation lapsed by 1986 they are keen on renewing it.

Their immediate programme is to draw up a list of areas such as human rights, the NCMC issue, facilities for students and so on, where they can take up common positions with their southern counterparts.