

Visiting Sri Lankan priest pleads for peace in faraway homeland

BY MONICA ISLEY

In a far-away land, on the other side of the world, people are dying. In Two Harbors, one man, himself a refugee from that distant war, keeps tabs on the news from Sri Lanka via the internet. If he is frustrated that so few people here know anything about his countrymen's plight, he keeps it mostly to himself.

The Rev. Edwin Savundra, a Catholic priest and formerly a teacher of philosophy at a major seminary in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, is in Two Harbors only temporarily while problems with his visa get ironed out.

While he waits, he says Mass at Holy Spirit Catholic Church, hears confessions and, in his quiet way, tries to make people aware of the struggle for freedom by the Tamil people, a tiny majority of Sri Lanka, who live mainly in the north and east portion of the country.

Jaffna is the Tamils' traditional heartland, the site of an ancient Tamil kingdom.

Savundra is quick to point out that his aim is not to drum up support for the 15-year war, but to plead for the justice which can bring peace.

He knows about the plight of the Tamil people because he is one of them. He was in Jaffna in 1995-96

when 700,000 Tamil people fled at the advance of government troops against the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). He and a handful of others stayed behind to minister to the 450, mostly the elderly and ill, who remained behind.

During that time, between dodging shells and burying friends, he kept a diary. Later, after being forced to leave his country because of his humanitarian efforts, he published that diary in a book called "A War Diary from Jaffna."

In it, he recalls taking cover in a room of the bishop's house where he was staying, wondering if he would be safer in another room, and then hearing a shell explode in the very room he had considered.

He tells about going with friends to bury the body of a 10-year-old girl, whose father and brother had already been killed in the shelling. The gravedigger at the cemetery was late. When he finally arrived, and they found the grave, they saw that a shell had exploded only moments before. The grave digger's tardiness had inadvertently saved their lives.

"I have grown from that war," he said quietly, eating his bowl of soup at the Holy Spirit rectory last week. "I saw children killed. It's something

I'll never forget in my life. "War is a painful situation, and when it is unjust, it is doubly painful."

Eventually, Jaffna was taken by the government troops, and his written tale moves to stories of surviving in an occupied city. He talks about government troops who were kind, and others who took advantage of their position. He talks about those who respected his priestly position, and the ministry he offered the needy, and those who harassed him for it.

The largely Hindu Tamils are a minority of 3.5 million people in a country where the 14 million Buddhist Sinhalese are the majority ruling class. For years, the Tamils have been trying to regain their rights in land, language, education and economy, lost after Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) obtained its independence in 1948. They began by trying to settle the problems politically.

Fifteen years ago, after endless talk that proved futile, the war broke out. Now, discouraged that they will never be able to co-exist peacefully, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) are asking for independence. At the time of Sri Lanka's independence from Britain in 1948,

Tamils were the island's better-educated ethnic group because of missionary policies of the 19th and 20th centuries, and Sinhalese accused the British of favoring Tamils for bureaucratic posts.

But democratic rule shifted power to the Sinhalese, who account for 74 percent of the population. In 1970, quotas reduced the Tamils' access to higher education, their numbers in the civil service were halved between 1970 and 1980, and Sinhala supplanted English as the national language.

The battle for Sri Lanka rages out of the international spotlight, since it holds no strategic value. Meanwhile, Savundra, who takes no political sides, appeals in his book to the humanity of the leaders of his country, as well as to those countries supplying arms to Sri Lanka, to stop the war.

In an appendix in his book, called "Pleading for Peace," Savundra challenges the rest of the world to be like the Good Samaritan of the New Testament, who did not pass by the poor traveler despite his ethnic difference, but stayed to help.

"The problems of the Tamils is the problem of a race struggling to maintain its identity," he wrote. "It is time that the people of good will call upon



Photo by Monica Isley
Fr. Edwin Savundra checks in on the internet to see how things are going with the Tamil people in his Sri Lankan homeland.

the world community to look at the suffering people of our country sympathetically, so that they can alleviate their anguish."

Savundra expects to remain in Two Harbors only for another week

Election results:

Continued from page 1
GOVERNOR & LT. GOVERNOR
CONSTITUTIONAL

Ruth A. Mason-L (95)

CONSTITUTIONAL

Lake County News-Chronicle