

**Friends of Prisoners' Children
organise a Family Day
in the Colombo Prison**

4 September 2016

Friends of Prisoners' Children initiated a most exciting program in the prison. This is the context. Some of the suspects of the terrorist movement called 'LTTE' – the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam are incarcerated in the Colombo prison. No definite case has been brought against them so far. They are asking for a release or conviction, as for the moment their plight is uncertain legally.

So, the Friends of Prisoners' Children planned a 'family day' for them. All their families were invited to come to the Colombo prison to spend the day with the prisoner. About 350 people were involved, including parents, children and grand-children – some the prisoner had never seen. They came from the North and East of Sri Lanka, travelling by night to spend the entire day with the prisoners and return the next night. The ICRC helped them with the travel expenses, and the Good Shepherd organisation saw to everything else – food, school books, toys and other aspects. The best of it was of course the freedom to enjoy each other's company. It gave great joy to all of the organizers, as well as to the authorities in the prison.



There are many beautiful photos of the event, but the decision was taken not to publish them so as to give the LTTE suspects and their families the privacy they deserve.

A Personal Reflection by a participant

A Moving Event

Last morning I visited the Remand Prison at Welikada. Sister Immaculate De Alwis (Priyanthi's Principal at St.Bridget's) had organized for the families of mostly LTTE suspects to visit them and spend the day. I was told by the officials that a normal visitation would be limited to a few minutes, closely watched by guards and the two parties would be separated by a wire mesh.

I cannot recall another moment I had been profoundly moved and tremendously sad in recent times. May be when I had been close to where LTTE had massacred a village close to Horowpotana in the eighties. Or when I was waiting my turn to donate blood in the aftermath of Pettah bomb blast. But then I recall there was much anger too. I was also many years younger.

Yesterday I saw only human beings. Infants and kids as young as my grandchildren, men and women of age close to my own children and mothers who could have been of the age of my own, had she still been alive. I felt as though I saw my own kith and kin.

Many were languishing for years under PTA. Most were being kept under suspicion for years. There were a few Sinhalese and Muslims too. It looked like it was far easier to lock someone on suspicion than letting him out even after many years. Many had been detained for years such as 8, 10 or even 14. It looked like those who energetically locked them in had then completely lost interest in them. I think it's far more difficult to free someone than lock them up.

I saw a family of three kids and naturally the youngest had the best position sitting on Dad's lap and the two elder ones, both looking early teenagers, had to be satisfied of leaning against Dad's back, claiming every inch of his body. An old Grandma was holding an infant fast asleep. Her face told a story of misery and thousands of battles. For hours she was immobile. I know how painful it becomes after holding an infant in one position. She seemed to be numb to all pain.

There was a middle aged man whose old and withered Mom was leaning against his back as the front was claimed by wife. Wife looked shy. Was constantly loosening his wrist watch and retying. Forever. Ever so slowly. Time was totally lost. And in that moment I realized what a great blessing to hold the ones you love at any moment and for any long.

And then there was another couple. The husband barely recognized the wife sitting inches away. He was lost forever. In deep and painful thought as if having reached a jhana. Was he

thinking of the moment she had to leave whilst everyone around seems to be enjoying the rare union and enjoying every tiny second passing?

And then there was this Sinhala Catholic with two young daughters who sat away from the rest leaning against a Buddhist shrine room (I only saw Buddhist shrines and Bo trees around). He told me that this was his eighth year passing. He seemed to have resigned to his fate and told me it's God's wish that he should be incarcerated and the God would decide when he should be free.

At the end I left. There were puppet shows, singing and dancing, giving away book parcels. More than enough food and drinks. Art competitions. Many activities to lighten the heart and make everyone happy. For a few hours in many long years. And probably for many more years.

When I left those imposing and gloomy walls I suddenly recalled the ending of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

Plans for 8 January 2017

Another initiative is being planned for 8 January 2017. All the children who are sponsored by Friends of Prisoners' Children and their guardians will be invited to a similar reunion with the parent in prison. It is expected that there may be as many as 800 in all.

God will help us with the expenses as he has done through his friends all round Sri Lanka, and also abroad. The joy everyone experienced on that day, gives us greater joy, and we thank Our Heavenly Father for it all.

Submitted by Sr Immaculate De Alwis