

The long road to peace

By Rumana Husain



Rumana Husain participated in the monitoring of Sri Lanka's recently held parliamentary elections as a member of an independent group

I was on my way to Marawila, located 50 miles north of Colombo, to join the three other members of our team. The exciting prospect was to be part of a hundred individuals who were called upon by the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), to observe elections in Sri Lanka.

One of the editorial articles of LMD, a popular publication from Colombo, which I had leafed through during the night, had a commentary called Politicians Causing Acute Polarization that gave much food for thought. It said that the 24 political parties and 192 independent groups (yes, in a small island that is home to just over 19 million people) are contesting the 2004 general elections, and are carrying names that portray their ethnic or religious biases amongst them Tamil National Alliance, Eelam People's Democratic Party, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, Sri Lanka Muslim Kadchi and Maha Sinhale Bhoomi Puthra Party.

Two days before the parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka were to be held on Friday April 2, some election posters of UPFA President Chandrika Bandranaike Kumaratunga's party as well as those of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's UNP, were still visible. Election campaigning had been restricted mostly to electronic media, rather than posters and billboards. Active campaigning was supposed to have ceased 48 hours before polling day, but the betel leaf symbol of the UPFA and the ubiquitous Lanka elephant (the UNP symbol) popped up here and there.

PAFFREL's election monitoring efforts are now in their sixteenth year. Supported by external funding it was able to invite international election monitors and to place media advertisements for voter education.

At Marawila, a small town in the Puttalam district in the north-western province, I met up with my teammates: Lorna Mc Gregor, a young Harvard law graduate from Scotland, Akemi Marumo, a retired civil servant from Japan, who is back at school in York, UK, and a young man from Thailand, Pongsak Chanon, who was conveniently christened long by the other two women. PAFFREL had provided an interpreter for each team of two to four people and an interpreter called Kusum also joined us.

Hundreds of thick coconut plantations, the clear blue waters of the ocean, as well as lagoons with fishermen in their boats or fishing on stilts, completed the picture-book imagery of this beautiful beach resort. Our interpreter was determined to take us around the entire Puttalam district that day as well as the following day, for pre-election observations. We had to fax our report to Colombo on the eve of polling day.

Our first stop was the Sarvodaya district centre, where its coordinating officer, also doubling as coordinator for PAFFREL in Marawila, met us along with her colleagues. Sarvodaya is the biggest self-aid campaign of the Sri Lankans towards economic and social development, aiming to build a new society based on the Buddhist principles of non-violence, truth and selflessness.

We were informed about a few incidences of violence and irregularities that had taken place since the election campaign began, but it was generally believed that the election campaign had been a Peaceful one only four assassinations had taken place two days before polling, as compared to 67 the last time.

This time, I feel we will, like America, just vote and carry on with our work. There will be no trouble. This is a turning point in our election history, said Gunawardana, Sarvodaya's legal coordinator.

We then travelled to Chilaw, and on to a town further north, where we had to meet another coordinator as well as the senior superintendent of police, to

learn about the arrangements made for the elections.

On the way, we went to meet Rev. Father Edward Karunanayake, who met us in his office in a church. by office monitors five electorates, he said, and added, 700 people who will be inside the election booths (two persons per polling station) were given training for the elections. I asked the criteria for selection of the local monitors, and was informed that four different organizations had come together to select the monitors in the district.

In all, PAFFREL had deployed 19,865 local monitors throughout the island. compared to 2001, this time there have only been verbal threats in these electorates, but the next five days can be dangerous, he said, but on a positive note added, people are moving away from party politics, so even village leaders might have an influence; people are educated enough to know what to do.

At the end of the two days we were pleased with ourselves for accomplishing an exhaustive list of places and people whom we met. We went over to a meeting in the town hall in Puttalam this coastal city is approximately a four-hour drive north of Colombo.

We met a Muslim candidate whose house had been bomb-blasted the night before. We went over to his opponent's party office to find out if the bombing episode had been staged. We met a Buddhist priest in a temple in Anamaduwa and in a far-flung village we met a victim whose back had been slashed with several knife stabs a few weeks ago. We also met the internally displaced people refugees from the north in a camp outside Puttalam, to check if they had received their voting cards.

According to the police, the most vulnerable polling stations located within the district were in Anamaduwa, Chilaw and Puttalam. Therefore, on the day of the polling, we split into two teams. Song and I were to monitor the villages and towns around Marawila, Anamaduwa and Chilaw, while Lorna and Akemi were to visit Puttalam and the displaced voters in the refugee camps further north.

We woke up at 5:00 am on Friday morning, all excited about our big

assignment. Song and I met up with Justin Parrera, a chirpy middle-aged engineer who was to be our interpreter, and reached the first station at 6:45 am. Polling was to commence at 7:00 am and end at 4:00 pm. We were required to visit around 10 to 15 polling stations, but in all we visited 19 stations.

These were mostly located in public schools, but some private schools had also been converted into polling stations. We asked villagers to show us their fingers for the indelible ink-mark and got their opinions on the elections. We didn't even stop for lunch, just gobbled a slice of pineapple and a banana in the van.

Song might have been unimpressed with the lush foliage as he came from a tropical country, but I was a Karachi woman, starved for greenery. I was taking in the beauty of the island, as our van glided on fine smooth roads across the district.

Every now and then, I imagined a herd of elephants showing up from behind temple-flower trees, cinnamon trees and jack fruit trees. I imagined serpents disappearing behind tall slender palm trees. Instead, each time, we either came upon groups of people in sarongs, skirts or saris, lined up for the polls, or happy faces chatting under colourful umbrellas.

It was a bright day but not too hot. The heavens had opened up the previous day, giving some respite to a drought-struck western part of the island. The discipline amongst the voters and the elegance with which the officers (mostly women) conducted themselves inside the polling stations was an eye-opener.

Sri Lanka is not only endowed with natural beauty, it also has the distinction of having the highest literacy rate in South Asia. Men and women of all classes and religious affiliations mix together comfortably. I was therefore a bit surprised that they were using election symbols. I thought this practice was only reserved for countries such as ours where most people cannot read the names of the candidates, or the party they are to vote for, and therefore a symbol is an important requirement.

We had to observe, ask, collect the required data and fill out our forms at each of the stations. These were to be handed in to PAFFREL, together with a

summary report, as soon as we reached Colombo. A serious incident was to be reported immediately by phone or fax. Compared to our situation in Pakistan, where people tend to stay away from polling stations, the Sri Lankans had an impressive turnout of over 80 per cent in certain areas.

We had agreed with the other three ladies to meet up at the hotel in Marawila at around 5:00 pm for the journey back to Colombo. All international observers were advised to return to the capital before 10:00 pm as there was fear of impending violence. As we entered the city, there was an eerie silence along the entire route to our hotel. In anticipation of a curfew, all businesses were closed and people were inside their homes, probably glued to their television sets. Fortunately, a curfew was not necessary.

The polling officers at each of the stations in the different locations that we had visited unanimously declared the elections as smooth, fair and fine. The Election Commissioner, Dayananda Dissanayake, also said that the 2004 elections had proven to be the most peaceful in recent history.

The split in the LTTE with the breakaway of its eastern leadership marred a free and fair election in the northeast. Even so, there was enthusiastic participation of voters from the LTTE-controlled areas, some of whom were voting after a period of 20 years.

We are strictly non-partisan. Our commitment is to free and fair elections, and to the people of Sri Lanka, thousands of whom have volunteered to be with us for this important national cause, said Kingsley Rodrigo, chairman of PAFFREL, appreciating the role of the local communities whose right to a free and fair election had been upheld by his organisation.

It might be true that there were some snags, misunderstandings, or lack of effective coordination, and it might also be true that despite some incidents of irregularity, the elections were declared fair as by and large the systems were in place. The election commissioner took stern action regarding election violations and election-related violence. Hundreds of senior police officials as well as constables were shifted from their original locations to prevent corruption, violation and intimidation.

The passion with which the Sri Lankans participated in the elections, and the strong sentiments of volunteerism are, for a Pakistani observer, at the top of the lessons learnt from this experience.