

“...THERE were many males and females in addition to children inside the house. We confined ourselves in a room. At about 2.30 pm somebody knocked at the door of the house. The Indian Peace Keeping soldiers who came inside the house first shot Mr Subramaniam and ordered the males and females to stand separately. They shot the males and then shot the females. I fell on the floor along with the dead and pretended to be dead and got up after the armed forces left. I saw my mother and brother dead, all totalling nine people. Later I left for the Madanthal Pillai Kovilady in search of my brother and sister. Since curfew was clamped I could not come back. Later, on 4.8.89, at about 2 pm curfew was relaxed. When we went to Surveyor Subramaniam's house, we found the dead bodies of nine people, putrefied, with offensive smells and could not identify them. I identified my brother and mother from the clothes they wore. At about 5.30 pm, with the help of the neighbours, we cremated the dead bodies of these two together with other seven dead bodies in a pit in the adjoining land.”

This is 18-year-old Rajeswathan Pushparaja's affidavit, sworn before the temple priest in his capacity as a Justice of Peace. (J.P.)

Mr Subramaniam, in whose house Rajeswathan and his family sought refuge, was a retired Superintendent of Surveys and a respected member of the community.

Another affidavit, signed by Arunadathy Sivalingam, married and 49 years of age reads:

“About 1.20 I heard gunshots coming from the direction of the junction. I also heard the very loud noise produced by the firing of shells. This noise went on for about 25 minutes. Then there was silence. I had cooked our lunch and was waiting the arrival of my husband. At about 2 pm some IPKF soldiers rushed into my house and started damaging all the articles. At this time there were only two males in the house - my husband's brother, Nadarajah, aged 62, a retired postmaster and my husband's nephew, Arudsothy, an employee of the Kankasanturai cement factory. Both of them were shot dead by the soldiers despite our appeal to them that they were honourable citizens. We even showed their national identity cards to them.”

These are just two of the many affidavits sworn by eye witnesses to the massacre in Velvettiturai, a village on Sri Lanka's northern coastline, on August 2, when the Indian Peace Keeping Force retaliated against the killing of six of their men in an LTTE ambush, by gunning down over 50 defenceless civilians.

Even today, more than a month after the incident, grief, bewilderment and a growing anger are visible. The village is eerily silent and deserted, save for the lone cyclist riding past the cluster of homes, shops and boutiques reduced to rubble. Here and there you see patches of scorched earth where the dead were cremated, since the putrefying bodies could not be moved. “It was the worst crime perpetrated against the people of Velvettiturai,” says a senior citizen of the village. “For three days, from August 2 to 4, a curfew

IPKF atrocities on civilians *Indian Express 24.8.89*

Massacre at Point Pedro

The recent massacre of civilians at Velvettiturai by the IPKF is not an isolated incident. In July and August, two other civilian massacres occurred at nearby Point Pedro. Express Correspondent RITA SEBASTIAN visits Velvettiturai and Point Pedro and gives an exclusive report through eyewitness accounts on how the peacekeepers turned into murderers.

imposed by the IPKF prevented people from burning their dead. And when the curfew was lifted, with so many of the men dead or missing, it was women who had to burn the bodies which traditionally no Hindu woman would do.”

Susheela Devi and Mahalakshmi were among the women who had to do this. We came upon them behind the bullet-riddled gate of one of the houses, where on that August morning they were widowed within minutes of each other. The men they were married to were brothers. Forty-year-old Mahandarajah was a driver, and his brother Velummylum a labourer. Susheeladevi weeps as she tells you her story:

“When the soldiers came into the compound they fired at the house, set fire to the car and then came into the kitchen, into which we had all run. As one of the soldiers pulled my husband into the yard, his mother and I held on to his hands and tried to drag him back, pleading with the soldier to let him go. The soldier just didn't heed our pleas, and pushing us aside shot my husband dead. They did the same to Vellummylum. We pleaded, we begged on our knees, even my 75-year-old mother-in-law Valliammal did so.” Valliammal was injured in the shooting because she refused to let go her sons. She is now in hospital.

In a neighbouring house, five sisters watched their 31-year-old brother, Nadarajah Ravindran, being brutally gunned down.

Fourteen-year-old Umadevi was witness to yet another scene of horror:

“The IPKF soldiers ordered the men to kneel down and opened fire. Four died on the spot and four were seriously wounded.” The dried bloodstains in the shed outside are the only evidence of the killings.

As we walk down the sandy lanes of Velvettiturai, now largely deserted since almost half of its population has fled to neighbouring villages, we meet Leela Soundarajah. When she heard the firing she and her five children jumped over the wall and sought refuge in a home further down the lane. What she returned to when the shooting was over was the burnt down shell of her house. A few yards away, the documents and money in the safe of the Rural Bank had been burnt to cinders.

At the home of Sabaratnam Selvendra, a chartered accountant who fled Colombo after the July 1983 communal riots and went to live in his ancestral home in Velvettiturai, where he took over the chairmanship of the Citizens' Committee, we see documented evidence of what really happened in Velvettiturai, that August day: Fifty-two bodies have been identified, 12 persons are still on the missing list and presumed dead, 43 injured, 122 houses and 45 shops burnt, ten cars, 50 bicycles, 175 fishing nets and fishing gear destroyed.

The Velvettiturai Citizens' Committee is one of the very few Citizens' Committees functioning in the Northern Peninsula, although its membership has come down from the original eleven to three.

“In the last three to four months there were no incidents in the area,” says Mr Selvendra, “one of the reasons being that with the village identified as the home of LTTE, no rival groups have been operating.” However, seven IPKF camps ring the village like a noose, and that fateful day, after the LTTE ambush of the IPKF patrol, the noose tightened with reinforcements arriving. Once the IPKF reprisals began there was no escape for the villagers.

“The crossfire syndrome has become the convenient excuse for civilian casualties, but in this case it wasn't so,” says a village elder.

“As the firing started people in the streets rushed into the buildings and nobody was killed at that time. It was later, when the reinforcements arrived, that the enraged soldiers dragged people out of the buildings in which they had sought refuge and shot them dead. Young men who were almost a kilometer away from the scene of incident were dragged into the area and were seen being rolled on the ground with the soldiers kicking them with their boots and hitting them with their rifle butts.”

“They poured something on the walls of the houses before setting them on fire,” says a retired government servant, in whose house two rooms were completely burnt down. With the help of neighbours, he managed to salvage a part of his house.

Sivamoneydevi Thalayasingham lost two of her sons that day. Twenty-one-year-old Sivakumar and 18-year-old Jeyamohan were at the village cinema hall, from where they were dragged out and taken by the IPKF, she told me. They were among 35 people who were detained that first day. Only seven of them returned to tell their terrible tale - the rest were doused with petrol and burnt.

“THE IPKF soldiers lined up the men and women separately. They shot the males first, then the females. I fell on the floor pretending to be dead.”

VELVETTITURAI is not an isolated incident of IPKF atrocities on innocent civilians. In recent weeks, two other such massacres took place - on July 26 and on August 21. We go down to Point Pedro, seven miles away. We travel the same way as we did on most of our journey, avoiding the main roads and IPKF sentry points, and taking bylanes and tracks no more than dirt roads. Most of the time, we are guided by some helpful villager who rides ahead of us on his bicycle.

At the base hospital in Point Pedro we are just in time to see Dr. John Louis, anaesthetist, and Dr. Richard Casey, surgeon, of the French team, finish their operations for the morning.

Since July 10, they tell us, they have handled 80 gunshot cases. “Things are getting worse, not better,” says Dr. Louis. On July 26, following the killing of an Indian soldier in an LTTE ambush in the area, 13 people were found dead within a radius of one mile. “Two or three were killed in their homes, others on the road, old men and young men.”

The most recent incident was on August 21 - significantly, the day after the visit of the Sri Lankan Minister of Foreign Affairs and De-

fence, Ranjan Wijeratne to Velvettiturai on a fact-finding mission. A visit described by the citizens of Velvettiturai as a non-event as far as they were concerned. Their attempts to meet the minister were very cleverly prevented by the IPKF top brass. Even Citizens' Committee President Selvendra managed to meet him by virtually forcing his way through an IPKF cordon. “The Indians flew him in and flew him out, and there was nothing we could do and our voices were never heard.”

It was after the minister left, and the soldiers from the Point Pedro camp who had provided security for the minister at Velvettiturai were returning to their home bases, that a third “massacre” took place.

Nobody seems certain what triggered it off, but the general feeling is that an Indian soldier had been fired upon by the LTTE, which sent the IPKF on the rampage again.

The death toll this time was 13, although only 11 bodies ended up at the Point Pedro base hospital.

Around 6.30 on the morning of August 21, the IPKF visited the home of 65-year-old Murugar Sinnathurai, a retired government servant. He was drawing water at the well when the IPKF surrounded the house, threw grenades and shot at random at the walls and the roof of the house, say his wife and daughter. Then, they pushed him into the compound. While his family pleaded with the soldiers and Sinnathurai himself begged them to let him go, a soldier shouted “fire” and another fired. “The bullets went through his heart,” sobs his wife as she shows us where he fell dead. In a nearby rubbish dump the bloodstained lungi he wore that morning is all that remains of the man.

About a mile away, we watch the last funeral ceremonies for 19-year-old Arulanatham Sudharan, cremated the day before. His mother is too distraught to talk to us. It is his father who takes me into his son's bedroom, his study, throws open his cupboard, points to his books and his notes, and asks me, “Do you call him a Tiger? My son was at his 85-year-old grandfather's for the night and had just wheeled his bicycle out onto the road to return home when the Indian soldiers returning to their camp dragged him away and shot him dead just a short distance away.” He had four bullet wounds, two in the heart and two on his thighs, says a visitor to the house.

We drive on to another house, where another family mourns their dead. A father, a son and a brother-in-law shot dead while their wives looked on. “We have had nothing to do with any kind of militancy, and they shoot us down like dogs,” says a man in the house. “Not even the photographs of India's great leaders like Gandhi and Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose, hanging on the walls of the homes here deter them.”

Driving back to town in the late evening, I remember what an Indian army captain said to me some months back about army excesses: “When a soldier is slapped by a man and he cannot find the man who slapped him, he slaps any man who looks like him.” And that was what the IPKF massacre of innocent civilians at Velvettiturai and Point Pedro was all about.