

Going the Distance

Indiana Pastor Works for Peace in "War Without Mercy"

By Jeannette Batz Cooperman

When darkness fell, he went to the beach. He'd been told that if a group of travelers congregated there in daylight, helicopters would fly over and strafe them. So he would travel by moonlight, crossing the lagoon on a makeshift ferry.

Rev. Paul Jahn, a friendly, middle-aged UCC pastor from Lamar, Indiana and 1979 Eden graduate (M.Div.), was trying to reach Jaffna, the Tamil capital of Sri Lanka. It was a long way from the rural churches he served as pastor. But the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict had been part of Jahn's life since 1987, when a missionary from the Jaffna Diocese Church of South India spent a year in the Indiana/Kentucky Conference; Jahn then traveled to Sri Lanka to express conference gratitude. In the early '90s, the conference established a partnership with the Jaffna Diocese. The Jaffna Diocese wanted two kinds of help: assistance in ministering to vulnerable children and advocacy in the U.S. to bring international attention and lessen the war's brutality. The quest for peace — for someone to tell the story to lawmakers and international organizations, to develop lines of communication and form partnerships — has been Jahn's work ever since, work his congregation has embraced as part of its ministry.

And so, he went to the beach when darkness fell.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam had been fighting for a separate homeland for more than a decade. When the Sri Lankan Army blocked the land route to the northern peninsula, the Tigers tied five long boats together as a ferry and guarded it from a motorboat armed with 50-caliber machine guns.

The Sri Lankan Navy kept shutting down the Tamil ferry — but tonight, it was running. As the only American present, Jahn was urged onto one of the first boats, surrounded by ill or wounded passengers who were traveling to the Tamil hospital.

He waded into the steamy water and helped push the boat into deeper water. Then he climbed aboard, dripping with sweat and muddy water, and watched trails of phosphorescent algae stripe the dark water behind them. Other boats were following. He situated himself, careful not to bump



▲ Rev. Paul "Chip" Jahn, who opened lines of communication with the Tamil rebels. "It's as simple as picking up a phone," he says, "but you have to know who to call."

against any of the wounded, and listened to the shelling, a constant rumble in the background.

Then he heard the rattle of machine guns, close behind him. Jahn could barely make out the Navy and Tamil boats behind them, but he heard the crossfire, and tracer rounds streaked light through the fog. His boat, now cut off from the others by the Navy, had no choice but to keep going. The other boats turned back, many of the civilian passengers already dead.

"There was absolutely no reason to kill those people," Jahn says now, his voice hollow. "They could have just stopped them; they could have taken them to the Army base." He made it to Jaffna and stayed a week, burning with what he'd witnessed. This was not his first foray into the northern peninsula.

On his very first trip in 1987, he arrived in the south and saw lush tropical flowers and beaches filled with coconut-oiled tourists. No sign of civil war — until he started to make his way north, through military checkpoints that at the time were controlled by the Indian Army, which had stepped in to try to broker a peace. Passed back and forth between the Indian and Sri

Lankan governments, Jahn finally set out for the north, traveling with a Sri Lankan pastor. "A certain deference was shown to members of the clergy," he notes. "The Christian clergy have one foot on each side of the ethnic conflict, so though small in number, they are important beyond the size of the population."

At the first checkpoint, they saw a huge line of trucks ahead and the minister said, "We just want to go to the church up there, do you mind if we slip around?" An officer, busy eating his lunch, waved them on. Five miles up the road, the officers at the next checkpoint noticed Jahn and said, "He can't be here." The minister pointed over his shoulder toward the previous checkpoint and said, "They said he could." They proceeded in this manner for 40 miles, stopped so often that the journey took the entire day. When they finally reached the restricted area where fighting had broken out, they were the first outsiders to witness it.

"When I got back, I was a *de facto* expert on the Sri Lankan conflict," Jahn says wryly. "The conference made contact with folks in Congress and shared what we knew."

By then, the International Red Cross had begun calling the Sri Lankan conflict "the war without mercy." Both sides were



▲ War damage in the city of Jaffna.

thought to shoot their own wounded. The United Nations had found more civilians killed or missing in this war, per capita, than in any other conflict. The Red Cross reported that nine out of 10 casualties were unarmed civilians. A center for torture victims in Toronto was flooded with Sri Lankans.

That's when the formal partnership began between the Jaffna Diocese and the



▲ Vehicles stopped at a checkpoint in northern Sri Lanka (2001).

Indiana/Kentucky Conference, along with the request for advocacy assistance. “We really didn’t have a lot of experience with international advocacy,” says Jahn, whose rural parishes had a long history of generosity and determination, but in more conventional mission work. “We got in touch with the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada, which had been very active. Then we looked at our resources. My congressman chaired the foreign affairs committee. I’m sorry to say it, but until that time, I didn’t know who my congressman was!”

Jahn and his congressman soon became fast friends. Jahn helped organize a coalition, the U.S. Working Group on Sri Lanka, which met in New York to plan projects. “All the advocacy in the first five years was funded by my churches and a few individuals in other churches,” he adds. “Our feeling was that, before we had money

“There is a scandal to the power that we have as American Christians. A handful of people in Indiana can accomplish things that a couple hundred people in the streets of Sri Lanka could not.”

amused that this small contingent of tenacious folks from southern Indiana kept coming to Washington to talk about Sri Lanka,” he says. “But we felt like we could take political risks—we weren’t Amnesty International or Asia Watch. And people in the conference felt like faith does call us sometimes to take physical risks. They would be easy for us to avoid, but then it wouldn’t be easy for us to do what needed to be done.

“Our willingness to go to Sri Lanka”—he’s already been there six times — “gained us credibility in Washington and in Sri Lanka,” says Jahn. “I think we were credited with more expertise than we had, especially in the beginning! Being a conference, and me being a church pastor, served us well; both were low profile, and we had anonymity and freedom. We went to the State Department, Congress, the United Nations, the World Bank. We never contacted any newspapers, and that sharp focus kept us from being burned, bringing too much attention to ourselves and not being able to get back into the area.”

The Indiana/Kentucky Conference

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taken out of the conference budget, we had to prove it was worthwhile. So my parishioners put together a discretionary pastor’s fund, which was helpful because often we had to act quickly.”

On that next trip to Sri Lanka, when he had to cross the lagoon, Jahn sent word back that he’d be staying longer, it was important. When he returned and told his story, the conference engaged with a new fierceness in its advocacy work. “People were



▲ Refugee family in northern Sri Lanka (1993).

pointed out, again and again, that the Sri Lankan government had come to depend on international funding. Even when the money was restricted, the conference freed up other monies that could be poured into this especially brutal war effort. They urged that both sides be made accountable. And after 9/11, they were asked to stay in touch with the Tigers, explain the implications of the world’s new terrorist vigil, keep the peace process moving forward.

Jahn grins. “We’d developed a close relationship with Lee Hamilton, co-chair of the 9/11 committee, and a guy who worked with him on South Asia issues. He looked over our plan and said, ‘Do you know what you guys bring to this? Sweet innocence.’ I said, ‘Do you mean stupid naiveté?’ And he said, ‘No. This is important. You try things we would never try, because we would assume they wouldn’t work.’

“And it didn’t work,” Jahn adds. “We tried to develop conflict resolution training,



▲ Officials of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India at the opening of a housing project for refugee families.

spent a lot of time in secret meetings with the Tamils, and then all of a sudden I got this call: ‘We are not interested.’ A week later, the Tigers tried to assassinate the president of Sri Lanka.”

Still, that innocent attempt laid the foundation for last year’s effort, which did work. “The government had presented a proposal for interim government. The Tigers weren’t entirely satisfied, so they rejected it out of hand,” said Jahn. One of Jahn’s Tamil contacts turned out to be one of the negotiators. “I suggested that the Tamils pulled out because they felt

uncomfortable sitting down across from constitutional experts in the Sri Lankan government and trying to negotiate legal minutiae. I suggested that we organize a training program with international experts in constitutional law, so the Tamils could develop a counter-proposal. People were skeptical, but the Tigers jumped at the opportunity. A colleague of mine in Great Britain had connections with experts in Northern Ireland and South Africa, and last November, they met in Dublin. The Tigers, for the first time, put together a counter proposal.”

The two sides are still a long way from meeting in the middle, but the Tigers have made compromises on earlier strident positions. “The peace process is going to be a long and difficult one,” says Jahn. “Both the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities have suffered greatly since 1983, and they bring all that to the table. But as long as a ceasefire holds, we don’t care how long the process takes.”