



JAFFNA UNIVERSITY SCIENCE TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA, SRI LANKA

Reg. No: 7872

T.Phone/Fax: +94-21-2222685

May 18, 2014

President:

Dr. J. P. Jeyadevan
(prince@jfn.ac.lk,
thevi123@gmail.com)

Vice-President:

Dr. P. Abiman
(abiman@jfn.ac.lk)

General Secretary:

Mr. N. Varathan
(varathan10@gmail.com)

Assistant Secretary:

Dr. (Mrs.). G. Rajkumar
(gowri450@yahoo.com),

Treasurer:

Mr. A. C. Thavaranjit
(anujiranjit@gmail.com)

Committee Members:

Dr. M. R. R. Hoole

Dr. N. Sivapalan

Mr. A. Laheetharan

Dr. E. Y. A. Charles

Jaffna University: In the Shadow of War and Peace on a War-Footing

Postwar, Jaffna University has shown considerable promise. After the lethargy and isolation of the war years, students from all communities are studying in the University, showing greater interest in their studies and library usage has livened up. The challenge is to provide a quality academic environment and reputation for probity in administration so that these students who work hard will take away with them the qualifications that are respected for worthy intellectual effort. Then we have ominous intrusions that dash hopes of the University regaining the stature it had in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Early in the week beginning on 5th May, events bearing on the anniversary of the end of the war on 18th May followed in quick succession. The Registrar sent out letters announcing the closure of the University from 16th to 20th May with no explanation. On the 7th leaflets were posted on the University premises making death threats against professors who are allegedly guiding students to support terrorism and student leaders of just the Arts and Science faculties and the leader of the University Student's Union. The academics threatened are Prof. Sivanathan, Dean of Arts, and Mr. Rasakumaran, Head of the English Language Teaching Centre, and the leader of the University Teachers' Association. The same day, Major General Udaya Perera invited university officials, including the Vice Chancellor, deans, and student leaders, for discussions the following day, 8th, where they were garlanded, feasted and flattered with dancers and singers. General Perera told them very politely that no observance in the University would be permitted on the 18th, as any observance would amount to extolling the late LTTE leader Prabhakaran and would thus count as an inducement to terrorism. SSP Jaffna told the *Sunday Times* (11th May), "Any persons trying to hoist black flags, distribute leaflets or put up posters will be considered supporting of terrorism and such persons will be taken into custody under the Prevention of Terrorism Act."

Continued.....

Why should Tamils speaking of the war be such an explosive issue five years after it ended, a war in which neither side owned a monopoly on terrorism? The answer has to do with the ideological polarization that remains because there is even less hope now of a political settlement to the national question that has been with us from Independence. Let us not forget that the Government is to observe the same anniversary in grand style in Matara, as the sole author of victory over the LTTE, and with all the pomp and circumstance that goes on around it.

Is it to prevent the Sinhalese people from asking awkward questions that the Government needs to play on their fears by harping on the revival of terrorism?

Why should the Tamils be barred from remembering thousands of people, young and old, most of them innocent, who died during the last phase of the war? They were scattered; many were separated from their families and many died when their loved ones were not in a position to mourn. The Tamil people should have the freedom to mourn collectively the untimely death of a large number of members of their community whether or not the dead persons are members of their family. When Sinhalese people remember dead JVP insurgents they are not subjected by the authorities to such repressive measures.

While the Government wants to use the war for political deception, it is only to be expected that its obverse, in the wake of hopelessness and humiliation in being forced to accept the Sinhalese of their lands and symbols, and the erasure of huge civilian suffering in the latter months of the war, might lead to latent nostalgia for the LTTE – despite the anger against its holding the civilians hostage in the last stages of the war. The way to deal with such nostalgia is allow people to express themselves freely, and to ensure that the mechanisms of justice function to eradicate, and not to instate impunity. The war is part of our history and we need to talk about it frankly, not just the end of it, but about the depraved politics on all sides that sustained it for three decades and even after its close, conspire to hold us in the mire of partisanship for decades to come. It is the very task of a university to offer the community leadership on such questions. But a politicized university that the authorities try to sanitize and repress cannot contribute to the task of reconciliation with dignity. This is evident in the way the University was closed.

The Registrar and Vice Chancellor are responsible for issuing the notice of closure referred to, but have evaded questions and refused to take responsibility. The threatening notices in the University again singled out the Dean of Arts, Prof. Sivanathan, as trying to revive the LTTE. The authorities and the Council should have condemned such crude intimidation, which strikes at the very root of a University – that the LTTE did this in its day is no excuse. The Dean was practically the only member of the Council to oppose, as he had done before, the recent recruitment as Computer Application Assistants a list of unqualified persons at the behest of a political party that virtually runs the Council. He rebuked the Council that this was a ‘malpractice’.

The issue of freedom to discuss the war thus runs much deeper; it is about defending academic freedom and excellence. It is to do with political appointments to the non-academic staff, which adds another dimension to surveillance and the appearance of threatening posters, as well as favouritism in academic appointments. Sadly these kinds of threats are not new to Jaffna University: in the post-war period threats against students and staff were issued in 2010, 2011, and 2012. The culture of threat and surveillance at the university affects everyone who works there:

spying and intrigue inhibit collegiality and the open exchange of ideas that are needed to produce excellent teaching and scholarship. If the university cannot be a safe place for the exercise of freedom of speech, for dissent and debate; if faculty are afraid to teach known facts, if students are afraid to attend classes, and if rehabilitated ex-combatants are never allowed to pursue their studies but are continually detained, pressurized, or made into informers, then we are not only cheating our youth of the chance positively to change their futures, but cheating our entire society of the opportunity to transform itself for the good of all who live in Lanka. Repression and intimidation only leads to further self-censorship and silence; this may secure acquiescence, but at the expense of the truth, which is at the heart of scientific inquiry, and of all knowledge. The university simply cannot function under these circumstances.

Yours sincerely,

.....

Dr. J.P. Jeyadevan, President JUSTA,