

Christian Tamil Priest shot dead by Army in Jaffna

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The Tamil speaking Christian community in Sri Lanka's northern city of Jaffna is shocked by the brutal murder of a Protestant Christian Tamil pastor in broad daylight on January 13th.

38 year old pastor of the evangelical Tamil mission church Jaffna , Rev. Nallathamby Gnanaseelan, was shot dead as he was travelling on his motor cycle along chapel street in the heart of Jaffna town.

The incident happened near the Vembaddy road junction at about 10. 30 am on Saturday .

Uniformed soldiers on duty near the Vembaddy - Hospital road were responsible for the brutal killing say eyewitnesses.

Rev. Gnanaseelan , a member of the National evangelical alliance clergy fellowship in Jaffna, was the pastor in charge of the Tamil mission Church in Jaffna.

On Saturday morning the pastor had gone on his motor bike to Jaffna hospital with his wife Serena and a seven year old eldest daughter who was sick. He had left the mother and daughter at the hospital at about 10. 00 am asking them to return home by bus after medical treatment was over.

Rev. Gnanaseelan was scheduled to be in Ariyalai where a day long prayer - fast was on at the church. He had then gone to the bazaar and bought a few things. Thereafter he was proceeding along chapel street on his motor cycle.

Soldiers stationed at the Vembaddy rd - Hospital rd junction were reportedly sauntering along the nearby roads. Soldiers had signalled Rev. Gnanaseelan to stop and the pastor had promptly obliged.

Suddenly one of the soldiers had fired from a few yards away hitting Rev. Gnanaseelan in the leg and stomach. The pastor fell with the bike too toppling down.

The soldiers had then walked closer to the man lying on the road and shot the bleeding priest in the head at point blank range. They had then taken away Rev. Gnanaseelan's bible, bag , ID card and other things in his possession and also his motor cycle.

The priest's body lay on the road for more than an hour till he was "officially" discovered by the Police at 11. 30 am. The acting Jaffna district judge Mr. M. Thirunavukkarasu went to the scene for a preliminary inquiry and instructed Police to trace the victim's identity.

The unidentified body was taken to the Jaffna hospital morgue.

Meanwhile Mrs. Serena Gnanaseelan with her daughter had returned home not knowing that her husband had been brutally murdered in cold blood by uniformed assassins.

She had not been perturbed even when Rev. Gnanaseelan had not returned home that night. Since a curfew was in force from 7.00 pm she had thought her husband was staying on in the church with parishioners during night.

People do not travel about Jaffna after 5. 00 pm and often they stay for the night in different places if they get delayed getting back home.

It was on the following Sunday morning that the family , relatives and congregation members realised that the priest was missing.

Some parishioners were informed by Police that an unidentified body was lying at the morgue and asked to see whether it was that of Rev. Gnanaseelan. Four persons were reported killed in Jaffna on the 13th.

Upon finding that the body was that of Rev. Gnanaseelan church members had informed Mrs. Gnanaseelan.

When distraught family members went to claim the body they were informed that the body was that of a “terrorist”.The Soldiers on duty at Vembaddy - hospital rd junction had reported that the victim had tried to take out a grenade from his bag and fling it at them. They had shot him dead in self - defence they had claimed.

In a bid to frame Rev. Gnanaseelan a grenade had been placed inside the bag by the authorities.

Upon finding that the dead man was a well - known Christian pastor the original story was amended accordingly. It was now claimed that the priest had not heeded instructions to stop. Therefore the soldiers were constrained to shoot and kill it was now said.

Military officials had wanted Mrs. Gnanaseelan to sign some documents. Despite strong pressure she had refused.

Rev. Gnanaseelan is the father of four children. The eldest girl is seven and the youngest girl one. Two sons are in between

The horrible daylight murder of a Christian priest and crude attempts to portray the victim as a “terrorist” has shocked , saddened , hurt and angered the Tamil christian community in Jaffna.

A statement issued by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance denies allegations regarding the murdered priest.

“Rev.Gnanaseelan was a member of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance Clergy Fellowship in Jaffna and was not involved in any political activity. He was a law abiding citizen and a Pastor to his congregation.” it says.

The statement also observes that ” His death is not an isolated incident, but one of many, which takes place in the North East of Sri Lanka, daily”. The statement goes on to say -

” Jaffna recently has been the scene of extra judicial killings, abductions and disappearances. The civilian population has been facing a severe shortage of food and medicine, enduring immense hardship and suffering. All this is in the backdrop to human rights violations continuing in full force in Sri Lanka. Thousands of people are arbitrarily arrested, tortured or ill treated. There are continued reports of extra judicial executions and forced ‘disappearances’, with abuses by paramilitary forces, the LTTE and the government security forces.”

The statement also appeals to the International community -

” We call upon the international community to raise their voices and prevent the massacre of the innocents in this country. The establishing of a United Nations human rights monitoring mission in Sri Lanka is an urgent need. The world cannot stand by and watch as this situation deteriorates, while every day, people pay with their lives.”.