

## **SRI LANKA: Building Ethnic Harmony With Community Radio**

By Kalinga Seneviratne

KOTHMALE, Jun 4, 2008 - In this tea-growing hill country, about 150 km from Colombo, a state-run community radio station is creating harmony among the country's Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim ethnic groups by broadcasting from the villages and opening up the airwaves to people's participation.

"People all over Sri Lanka are talking about peace, but this community radio has been doing it from the beginning," P. Pavitheran, an announcer at the Kothmale Community Radio (KCR) told IPS.

"We don't have any community divisions here," added the Tamil broadcaster who also speaks fluent Sinhalese and switches smoothly between the two languages on air. "All my (assisting) staff are Sinhalese, but we're all working together as a team."

KCR on FM band was set up by the government-owned Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) in 1989 with 3 hours of transmission three days a week. Today, it broadcasts 12.5 hours a day on weekdays and 8 hours on weekends in both Sinhalese and Tamil. It covers a modest 20-km radius that includes 60 villages and 3 rural towns and reaches a population of 200,000.

In a country torn by a bitter civil war for the past 25 years between the Tamil separatists led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the mainly Sinhalese government in Colombo, KCR is a beacon of hope for all those who would like to see peace return to this once serene island.

The Sinhalese form the largest ethnic group in the nation, composing approximately 81.9 percent of the total population of 20.7 million people. Tamils, brought in by British colonists to work on estate plantations, are officially called 'Indian Origin' Tamils and are distinct from the native Tamil population that is concentrated in the north and east of the island.

>From KCR's studios, situated on a hilltop overlooking scenic tea estates, the ethnic conflict seems distant. The station currently employs 8 permanent staff, 4 of whom are from the villages, as well as some 15 volunteers from the local community. The Sinhalese and the Tamil staff communicate with each other in Sinhalese and address each other as brother or sister.

"We have not restricted this station to one segment of the community only. We have included all the ethnic communities -- Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim -- in our programming," noted Sunil Wijesinghe, the controller of KCR.

"We encourage the community to come to the station and suggest programme ideas to us. We listen to them and even ask them to come in and do programmes for us, as long as it does not harm any other people," he said explaining the broadcasting strategy.

Speaking with IPS, he disputed the fact that a government-owned radio station is incapable of doing community broadcasting. "Yes, it is true I receive a monthly salary from the government, but I'm also a person from the village," he said. "I know the aspirations of the villagers, I know their needs and I have won their trust as someone who recognises these."

"This radio is very useful for the community. Lot of people, especially youth, listen to this radio because they like the local cultural content," says Sandanam Sathiyathan, field coordinator of a local non-governmental development organisation.

"The commercial channels don't broadcast these songs and cultural contents from the local community" he added. "They broadcast Indian film songs and dramas, but Kothmale community

radio gives an opportunity for the (Tamil) plantation areas to voice their opinions and culture."

"I have been a fan of this radio, so I have joined as a volunteer" said Taj Mohamad Kamil, a Muslim girl from the local community, who has just qualified to enter a university in the nearby city of Kandy. "Kothmale FM service identifies the needs of the community and satisfies it. All the people working here behave like brothers and sisters. They are very close to each other."

Dilshika Heshani Silva, a 20-year-old undergraduate student in mass communications at Kelaniya University in Colombo, says that while she studies the external degree, KCR has been most helpful in giving her the opportunity to gain experience as a volunteer producer and announcer.

"Because the radio (station) goes from village to village and gives information about the community, listeners here learn a lot about their own neighbourhood," she told IPS. "Working in this radio is an educational experience, whereas on commercial radio they always broadcast songs."

The outdoor station is mounted on a diesel-driven trishaw -- commonly used across South Asia as cheap taxis -- and is equipped with loudspeakers, mixers, digital sound recording system, a laptop computer, a printer and a small generator. A mobile phone is used to link up with the studio to broadcast live programmes from the villages.

When the mobile "broadcast studio" -- funded by a Sri Lankan charity foundation called MDF-- arrives in the tea estates there is much excitement. People gather around it and oblige with songs sung live on air. Switching between Tamil and Sinhalese the programmers skillfully weave live inputs into the broadcast.

"We enjoy our work here because we are always with the community," said Pavitheran, who often joins in with the singing and dancing. "People enjoy it and we enjoy it. This is the most important thing."

Tamil tea estate workers are among the most marginalised people in the country. But, in the past three decades, expansion of the free state education system to the estate communities has raised educational standards and almost all young boys and girls are literate and speak both Tamil and Sinhalese.

"Kothmale FM attracts the hearts of the plantation workers," said K. Arumugam, a trade union representative. "People are very close (to KCR) and this radio service should expand to all tea plantation communities in the hill country," he added.

Source: IPS