

Wednesday 30th January 2008.

Your Excellency the Apostolic Nuncio, His Grace the Archbishop and your Lordships,

Kindly permit me to let you know of the facts of the tragedy that took place in the "Madhu Church Reservation Area" (gazetted in 1982 as applicable during the major festivals) of the Madhu Shrine on 29.01.2008 for your kind attention and needed action. The perpetration of war and violence that is plunging our country into darkness, chaos and destruction had resulted in to another unbearable civilian tragedy one kilometer away on the Thatchanamadhu road from the Sacred Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu on the 29th of January 2008.

A claymore mine fixed up on a tree was set off at 2.25 in the afternoon on 29.01.2008, aimed at a school bus killing 12 school children under the age of 15 years and 6 adults who are school and hospital employees in addition to the driver and the cleaner. 18 more sustained injuries of whom 10 are minor children and the rest are adults of the above category including a Holy Family Sister who is a teacher in the same school. The Principal of the school is in a very critical condition with head injuries. The wounded are being treated at the Kilinochchi and Mulankavil hospitals in the Wannai. Conditions of some of the wounded children are reported to be very critical.

The particular school bus that was caught up in this tragic incident was moving from the school at Thatchanamadhu back to the Madhu Shrine campus from where children and teachers travel daily to the displaced school of Sinna Pandivirichan functioning at Thatchanamadhu. During the funeral services of these victims at Madhu on the 30th inst. from 3.30 to 6.00 PM, heavy shelling was taking place around Madhu. We informed the S.L. Army's Area Commander in Mannar about this and the shelling slowly subsided. The burial took place in a common grave at Madhu at 5.30 P.M.

As the Uylankulam Entry point to the Un-cleared area is closed down from the 1st of September, 2007, my personal pleas made to the SL Authorities here for permission to bring two of the dead bodies via the sea from Vidathalthivu to Mannar where all their relatives were living went on deaf ears. I am going to Madhu on 01.02.2008 early morning via Olanthai. All the children who got killed are children of our employees and our Alter servers choir members. On my return, I like to meet some responsible people in the Government and once again appeal to the Government to declare Madhu as a zone of peace to save this hallowed place of worship which has fostered throughout history, the faith and devotion our Catholics and has served also as a haven of refuge in conflict situations. I am thankful to you for your understanding and ready assistance.

Yours sincerely in Our Lord,

Bishop of Mannar