

TOO MANY LEGS

By Minoli Salgado (UK)

'Sinhala leg or Tamil leg?'

'Doesn't matter. Put it on the Tamil pile. There are too many Sinhala legs.'

'How many have we got?'

'9 Tamil. 19 Sinhala.'

'I should move one. We can't have odd numbers. We need two legs to confirm a body.'

'Can't do that. These ones are officers. People will find out.'

I stepped over the ticker tape and was counting as they talked. There were indeed 19 Sinhala legs, all trousered in police khaki. I made a note of the number and moved on to the Tamil pile where the disorder was more tangible in a mangle of sarongs and slippers. A burned hand fell open in the middle of the heap.

It was just another bomb blast but I had been lucky this time. I was in the next street buying a lunch packet when the boom took hold. I could make precise notes, despite the dust, and get them back to the office in time for the afternoon news. Years of censorship had skilled me to fire words like blanks. I noted time, place and number, then stepped aside to let someone pass. He tore a sarong from the Tamil pile and rushed to bind the legs of an injured man who was screaming at them to do something. Sirens blocked out his words. I could only make out the shouts of those sorting out limbs.

'Hey look, we've got a Muslim!'

'Or a Jew!'

Another leg thudded on the pile.

I went to the injured man across a drain of running blood. He was shouting for his son who'd run off to buy sweets just before the blast.

'He ran behind,' he said gesturing in the direction of a policeman who stood sifting through the rubble of a former teashop. The policeman lifted a wedge of corrugated iron.

'Found it!' he shouted. His colleagues rushed forward but I was in front and got to the bomber's head before the others did.

It was an astonishingly beautiful head, lying on its side, cleanly severed where the cord carrying the cyanide capsule might have been. A plait of hair was coiled on top. The girl about fifteen, eyes open wide on the face of a boy who lay by her and seemed to look back at her in a moment of stilled time. It was as if their bodies had dissolved in the gaze, *as if they recognised each other in that last instant of life*. I felt the warmth of the words as I wrote them and had to cross them out.

Recognition indeed!

I tallied up the body parts and went back to the office, pausing to tell the injured man precisely where his son lay.