

## Bicentenary Celebrations of the Survey Department of Sri Lanka (1800-2000)

In the middle of July 2000, the authors of „Cadastre 2014“ got an invitation to Sri Lanka, to present its visions and statements at the

### Some facts to Sri Lanka:

Area 65'610 km<sup>2</sup>, 19.1 mio. population (some 74% Sinhalese, 18% Tamils, 7% Muslim), annual GDP 1998: US\$ 2'500.  
Since 4. Century BC: several Sinhalese kingdoms and introduction of Buddhism in the 3rd century BC; immigration of Tamil groups from Southern India;  
1505: Portuguese seafarer colonized the coastal areas, but could not control the Sinhalese kingdom in Kandy in the interior of the island;  
1658: the Sinhalese kingdom can expel the Portuguese with Dutch support, but instead the Dutch take the trading control over the island;  
1796: arrival of the British, who in 1815 finally take control of the whole island including the Kandy kingdom; to labor the tea plantations, the British bring in many Tamil workers from Southern India;  
1948: independence within the British Commonwealth;  
Since 1983: civil war between factions of Tamil and Sinhalese groups.

present its visions and statements at the Bicentenary celebrations of the Survey Department, which were held on 2nd August 2000 in Colombo. This invitation came rather unexpected, but it was the more appreciative to realize that FIG publications obviously are being observed in member countries, that cannot participate regularly in the FIG activities.

The invitation included a 2 days excursion to the most important historic sites of Sri Lanka and two district Survey Offices.

The founding of the Survey Department is considered to be the proclamation which was signed on 2nd August 1800 by the then British Governor William Boyd. The proclamation declared that a Surveyor General be appointed, who will supervise the Surveying of the island. Surveying was mainly the preparation of the so called “title plans” which served as basis for land sales. In later years, the Survey Department also started to produce topographic maps.

During the first 2 years, Governor North was convinced that reform envisaged by the Land Proclamation was not yet possible in the country. The uncertainties of claims based on the ancient tenurial system, reluctance by the people to declare their rights for examination, inadequacies of the survey and administrative staffs caused for the failure of the first attempt made by statutory authority to introduce a comprehensive system of land registration in Ceylon. Most of the surveys carried out by the Survey Department during the first 50 years were confined to the preparation of the title plans for land sales.

The founding of the Survey Department has also to be seen from the point of view of the British colonializers; in their eyes, the Sinhalese had an unsecure land tenure system. In 1832, the British changed the land law, which then became the basis for the big land possessions of many British plantation owners. The Survey Department nowadays has 9.000 employees, of who some 3.000 are working in the head office in Colombo. Of the 3.000 employees, some 800 are surveyors. In the head office, there is also a printing office for the production of topographic maps.

The celebrations were held in the morning of 2nd August. The setting was very festive with the attendance of the responsible Minister of the Department of Agriculture and Lands. Also the president, Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunga sent her well wishes via video taped message. The speeches were held intermittently in Sinhalese, Tamil and English language. There were some 1.000 attendees, among them 7 (!) previous Surveyor Generals. This high number of very well recognized personalities can be attributed to the fact that the Surveyor Generals are being retired at the age of 60, and therefore cannot stay in office for a very long time. A highlight of the celebration was the philatelic first cancellation of a new stamp, showing the national importance of the Survey Department.



In the afternoon, some 400-500 people attended the technical presentations. These were divided into three sessions with the focus on Cadastre, Photogrammetry, and GIS. Local speakers first

presented the Sri Lankan activities in the field, while the international experts had been invited to present the “Global Trends”. For Photogrammetry, the international guest speaker was Prof. Dr. K. Jeyapalan from Iowa State University, for GIS, it was O. Hendriksen, technical director of Blom International, Norway, and for the Cadastral field, it was the author of this report.

The Cadastre in Sri Lanka is in principle still the old English deeds registration system (units are the transactions). Approx. 1 year ago, the Survey Department started with a reform project in order to transfer all 8 mio. parcels into a title registration system (units are the parcels). After one year, “only” some 58.000 parcels could be transferred into the new system, as the legal implications for solving land and title disputes are very cumbersome. Some data are in digital form, whereas AutoCad is used as standard software.

The invitation to Sri Lanka also included a sightseeing tour to the most important historic sites (Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, Kandy). This was followed by a visit to the “Institute of Surveying and Mapping” in Diyatalawa, which is situated at an elevation of 1.200m above sea level in the hill country in the Southern center of the island, in the middle of big tea plantations. As the only institution in the country, the ISM offers a university degree in Surveying (some 50 students per year, studies take 4 years). In Diyatalawa, I was accommodated in the circuit bungalow of the Survey Department, spoilt by the service personnel.

**Circuit Bungalows** were introduced by the British towards the end of the 19th Century, to provide accommodation for the field surveyors. Later on, these bungalows were also used as holiday accommodation for higher employees. This tradition is maintained nowadays, and guests as well as higher employees can spend their holidays there at marginal costs.

I would like to express my very warm thank you to the persons that organized this visit, the Surveyor General Mr. Ranasinghe Silva, the Deputy Surveyor General Mr. P.J.P. Mendis, Mr. Dampegama, Mr. K. Mallausayachchi, and all the other persons from the Survey Department who I met during my visit.

Daniel Steudler, Diyatalawa, 7. August 2000