

The Sri Lanka Monitor

No 98

March 1996

Produced by the British Refugee Council

UN refugee warning

UNITED NATION'S World Food Programme (WFP) officers sounded a warning after visiting Sri Lanka's war-torn north in mid-March that insufficient government food aid was reaching the refugees.

The visit followed a request by the Sri Lankan government for 500,000 tonnes of UN emergency food aid. WFP officers say 510,000 people are affected by displacement and drought. According to the government over one million people around the country are currently receiving food relief because of the war. Drought has decimated the *Maha* season crops and estimates say rice production will fall by 20 million bushels from the usual 85 million.

NGOs say food and medicine stocks are depleted and logistics is a major problem. Delay of food convoys to the Vanni and lack of storage and transport facilities coupled with complicated government procedures and bureaucratic delays are crippling humanitarian assistance. Only state agencies can send food and medical supplies to the north. A new rule in March says that international NGOs in the north who provide other relief inputs cannot strengthen their programmes to respond to the refugee emergency.

Observers say there is a deliberate government policy to delay decisions. The Ministry of Defence which controls relief assistance is inaccessible and there is concern that humanitarian principles are becoming subordinated to military objectives. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also insists on supervising all assistance in areas under its control.

NGOs say conditions for thousands of displaced people are deteriorating. Requests to the government to allow the

New relief crisis imminent

media and international agencies into Army-occupied areas in Jaffna, to give confidence to the people to return have fallen on deaf ears.

Over 200,000 Jaffna civilians who remain in the LTTE-controlled enclave around Point Pedro in the north-east corner of the peninsula fear a major Army operation is imminent. New shelling and aerial bombing of these eastern areas of the peninsula in March caused further damage and displacement. In late March the Army began recruiting 10,000 new soldiers and urged civilians in the north-east to move away from LTTE camps.

The Army launched an operation on 29 March in Valikamam area in Jaffna where assaults of LTTE units continue. Tiger raids in the east have killed over 125 soldiers in March alone. The LTTE also sunk five naval vessels in Jaffna and Mannar killing 38 sailors. In Colombo the pressure on Tamils continues following the discovery of several bombs.

Priority to war efforts means peace must take a backseat. In a March interview to *India Business Week* President Chandrika Kumaratunge says that the Sinhalese people are becoming impatient and an all-out-war with the LTTE is inevitable which may endanger Tamils in the south. President Chandrika has declared that the Tamils support the LTTE by their silence and called on Tamil parties to stick their necks out by stating their real position.

The Tamil parties, concerned over a number of hardhitting statements by the President say that the two main political parties are unable to achieve consensus on the devolution proposals and attempts are being made to place the blame on the Tamils. Observers point out that

P r e s i d e n t Chandrika initiated discussions with the LTTE while she was aware of the Tigers' record of assassinating

other Tamils during talks with President Premadasa's government in 1989.

Observers say President Chandrika's hardline attitude indicates that she is under pressure. The government is facing corruption charges over allegations that a minister accepted a Rs 20 million bribe to change a cabinet decision and the Court of Appeal has ruled that the dissolution of two Provincial Councils in January is illegal.

Consensus between the two main parties seems increasingly remote. Supporters of the ruling People's Alliance and opposition United National Party (UNP) clashed in Matale on 15 March. The Matale court has ordered the arrest of Central Provincial minister Vasantha Aluwihare in connection with the gunning down of S Kanagasundaram during the incident.

Tamil parties held discussions with Buddhist high priest the Mahanayake Thera of Malwatte in Kandy on 9 March. Four days earlier, a gathering of over 2,000 Buddhist monks in Colombo denounced the government peace package as an attempt to introduce federalism by the back door and called for stamping out of LTTE terrorism.

As the call for war gathers momentum there is concern over the conditions of those remaining in Army-occupied areas in the north-east. In a March report titled *Silent War: Censorship and the Conflict in Sri Lanka*, the London-based agency Article 19 has demanded access to the north-east for journalists. Article 19 has also called for impartial investigations into all human rights abuses.

Speaking at the 52nd Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva on 1 April, Sri Lankan ambassador AB Goonetilleke warned the international community of armed groups violating humanitarian laws on the pretext of seeking redress for minorities. NGOs at the Sessions pointed out that neither the Sri Lankan state nor the LTTE currently seem bound by the norms of war set out in international humanitarian law.

■ **After an influx of 200,000 refugees, Kilinochchi's health sector is in crisis with people queuing all day for makeshift clinics in churches and schools. Drugs, equipment and medical staff are in desperately short supply. Government officers routinely refuse NGO pleas to upgrade refugee health and housing insisting people must return to Jaffna.**

THE NORTH

The spoils of war

POLITICAL agendas are visibly driving the combatants' approach to humanitarian assistance say NGOs in the north - the Tigers to keep control of civilians and the government to claim credit for caring for its citizens. International agencies are increasingly facing restrictions and provide only 10% to 15% of all assistance. NGOs say they are only able to stockpile non-food items and warn that in case of a major military operation civilians will suffer.

ICRC's requests for medicines has been denied by the Ministry of Defence and it may be forced to cancel its eight mobile clinics in the Vanni. Only 48 of 101 medicines requested for Mullaitivu District in late 1995 were allowed by Colombo and no medicines have been received for 1996. Malnutrition and lack of vaccination have increased the risk of disease.

Kilinochchi GA S Thillainadarajah complains that restrictions at the Eeratperiyakulam Army camp south of Vavuniya is making it difficult for lorry owners to transport fuel and fertiliser to the north. The Army insists that only those who are permanently resident in Vavuniya may transport essential goods.

In Jaffna, shortage of medicines in Vadamarrachy and Thenmarachy areas is causing grave concern. At Point Pedro hospital current medicine stocks are depleted and French medical agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) is restricted to only emergency surgery.

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) says the military must guarantee the safety of doctors before compelling them to work in Jaffna after 15 doctors returned to the south. The Defence Ministry says the LTTE shot dead Dr Sri Vallipuram at Inuvil on 13 March.

In three separate attacks on Army positions in Valikamam LTTE killed four soldiers in early March. The Defence Ministry says four LTTE boats plying from Iranaitivu Island to Devil's Point south of Jaffna peninsula were sunk by the Navy on the same day. Eighteen soldiers died and 10 others wounded in a landmine explosion at Mallakam on 18 March.

A LTTE unit launched an attack on Araliturai two days later killing seven soldiers and injuring five. Eighteen Tigers also died in the assault. In a devastating suicide attack on 30 March *Sea Tigers* destroyed a *Dvora* naval craft between Vetrilaikerni and Chalai killing 14 sailors. The Defence Ministry claims that 20 Tigers died when four *Sea Tiger* craft were destroyed in counter-attacks.

Military attacks on LTTE-held areas in Jaffna have continued. Four civilians were killed and 12 others injured by shells in Chavakachcheri on 19 March. The Airforce attacked Vadamarrachy on 26 March damaging several houses. The Chavakachcheri Girls College was damaged by shells from Palaly Army camp on the same day.

Secure

British Home Office minister Ann Widdecombe says in a February letter to the Bishop of Coventry that the Sri Lankan conflict is confined to the north-east and there is sufficient security elsewhere on the island to return refused asylum-seekers safely.

Death

Leading Tamil journalist and former *Sunday Times* editor Rita Sebastian, 60, died of cancer in Colombo on 29 March. She was the first woman editor of a national newspaper in Sri Lanka.

Power

The four-hour daily power cut imposed on 22 March was extended to five hours in early April. The Ceylon Electricity Board says further cuts may be necessary if the drought continues.

Weapons

Arms hidden in a cave at Akuressa in Matara District were discovered by police on 7 March. Campaign materials of the Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) were also found. The 25th Anniversary of the first insurrection of the JVP falls on 5 April.

Election

India's ruling Congress (I) party has forged an alliance with the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha's AIADMK party for general elections scheduled to be held in four stages beginning on 27 April.

Mannar massacre

SRI LANKAN Airforce helicopter gunships attacked Nachchikudah in Mannar at dawn on 16 March killing 15 civilians, and injuring over 60 others. The Defence Ministry says 30 Tigers were killed.

MP Joseph Pararajasingham says the bombing was carried out in retaliation for a LTTE attack a day earlier. *Sea Tigers* sank three naval vessels 3km north of Pallimunai on Mannar Island on 15 March killing 16 sailors. Eight other went missing after the attack.

Three Tigers died when troops launched an assault at Vattakandal on 3 March. The military say the hideout was used as a political headquarters by the LTTE. The Army avoided disaster when a landmine was discovered on 18 March on the causeway linking the Army-held

Mannar Island and the LTTE-controlled mainland.

On Mannar Island people complain that Pesalai hospital has no electricity and lacks medicines. The only ambulance has been removed to the Mannar hospital. Police assistance had to be sought to transport a snakebite victim to the Mannar hospital in mid-March.

The Army ban on the boat service from Mannar Island northward to Vidaltivu remains. Fishermen say they are unable to market their fish, because there is only a weekly boat service from Mannar to Kalpitty in Puttalam District, although the passenger service is three times a week.

In Puttalam hundreds of thousands of Muslims from all parts of the island gath-

ered on 20 March for a three-day International Islamic Conference. Over 2,000 foreign delegates attended the parley. In her message President Chandrika said the meeting was proof of the religious freedom that the government wished to ensure to all citizens.

Puttalam District is also home to over 40,000 Muslim refugees, driven out from the north by a LTTE ultimatum in October 1990, who have no hope of returning to their homes. At a meeting chaired by the Rehabilitation minister MHM Ashraff a decision was taken to build 2,150 permanent houses in Ulukkupallam and Erukampiddy in Puttalam to resettle the refugees. But doubts remain whether this plan will be implemented.

■ 40 soldiers die in Tiger ambush

The east's forgotten war flares

THE LTTE has launched several devastating attacks in the east in a bid to divert the Army's attention from the north where a major military operation is said to be imminent. Over 300 Tigers ambushed an Army patrol at Vantharumoolai on 23 March killing 40 soldiers and injuring 13 others. In the shelling that followed seven year-old Ranjani was killed.

Earlier in the month, 23 Special Task Force (STF) personnel died in an assault on 11 March in Vellaveli. Following the incident a student was shot dead by the STF. The Tigers attacked a police post at Alinchipothana, 12km west of Welikanda killing five policemen and injuring 10.

In early March the Army accompa-

nied by heavy shelling advanced 10km south-west from Chenkalady along the Badulla road. Over 5,000 civilians fled the area into jungles. The Army says 25 Tigers were killed at Mullaivaddavan and a major LTTE base was destroyed.

Civilians in the east are facing increasing pressure from the Army and the LTTE. In early March two men accused of rape were shaven and humiliated in a public parade by the Tigers in Vaharai. Eight civilians working in their fields on 1 March in Mahilavaddavan were arrested by the Army. Only five people were released later. K Thangarasa died in crossfire at Peruvaddai on 7 March. Local MP K Thurairajasingham says in a letter to President Chandrika

that security forces ran amok in Thiyavaddavan on the same day attacking civilians. Three soldiers are in custody in connection with the rape of five women in the village. According to the MP the whereabouts of six people arrested by the Army in Sithandy and Kaluvankerni are unknown.

The LTTE-controlled Vaharai area west of the Batticaloa lagoon was shelled and bombed by the military on 11 March. A woman was killed and four others were injured. Alleged LTTE gunmen shot and injured Batticaloa GA AK Pathmanathan in Kallady on 18 March. The bodies of V Kathalingam and Sooti abducted in February were found on 20 March in LTTE-held Iluppachchenai. The ICRC has been allowed to escort a limited number of food lorries into Vaharai. Reports say restrictions on food and fertiliser and the burning of crops have caused widespread shortage.

Further south in Amparai District, Chandrasekaram was shot dead by the LTTE on 1 March. Two STF died in a Tiger ambush at Sinnawathai on 23 March. A Tiger attack on a telecommunication centre two days later in Akkaraipattu caused Rs 30 million (\$600,000) damage.

In Trincomalee District seven soldiers were identified by witnesses in an identification parade in early March, as participants in the Kumarapuram massacre in which 28 Tamils died in February. The Sri Lanka Navy attacked a *Sea Tiger* boat on 5 March killing a LTTE cadre.

Licence to kill

FEAR stalks the border town of Vavuniya after almost 20 people were mysteriously killed in the last year. The police are unable or unwilling to find the perpetrators. The murder of Sithamparapuram refugee camp officer T Sritharan in January still remains a mystery. The bodies of two other men were found in Vavuniya town on 27 March. They had been shot through the head. Suspicion falls on Tamil group PLOTE whose armed militia controls Vavuniya and extorts taxes from food aid convoys and civilians crossing the military checkpoint at Thandikulam. Observers say those who fail to cooperate and LTTE suspects are dealt with by PLOTE. But PLOTE is not alone in the use of terror tactics against civilians. Three Tamils, K Kanagalingam, K Kanageswaran and T Pulendirarajah were brutally hacked to death on 4 March in Salambaikulam, 7 miles west of Vavuniya on Mannar road. Pulendirarajah's wife Sivayogarani who suffered serious injuries identified two soldiers as the assailants. The Presidential Commission on Disappearances for the north-east held inquiries for a week in Vavuniya in mid-March. A spokesman said the Commission received evidence in 141 cases of disappearance in northern districts after arrest or abduction by the Sri Lankan military, Indian Peace Keeping Force or Tamil militant groups. The Commission sat on four occasions in Trincomalee and inquired into some 1,000 complaints.

In the past one year over 75 people in the east, including 40 in Trincomalee have been shot dead by LTTE cadre, dubbed by the Army as the *Pistol Group*. Those killed has included Chenkalady local councillor T Jeyarajan and Batticaloa Deputy Mayor Thomas Anthony. Tamil militant groups TELO and PLOTE accused by the LTTE as collaborators and traitors are particular targets.

Strike threat

CEYLON WORKERS CONGRESS leader S Thondaman announced in mid-March that over 500,000 plantation workers will stage a week's strike beginning on 22 April, demanding wage increases and 300 days work a year.

Some 12 other trade unions making up the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JCPTU) will begin an indefinite strike on the same day but over a monthly wage of Rs 2,000 and tripartite negotiations for a collective agreement. Planters Association Chairman Mahendra Amerasuriya says the 23 companies which have a 50-year lease of estates cannot afford the Rs 3 billion (\$60 million) the demands will entail.

Plantation workers complain that conditions continue to deteriorate under pri-

vate management. Over 6,000 workers in Punduloya area in Nuwara Eliya District demonstrated on 14 March demanding better terms and conditions.

Over 60% of the Plantation Tamils have no identity cards leading to harassment and arrests. Three youths from Selagama Estate in Matale were arrested at Marawila in mid-March. On 12 March police took into custody 118 Hill Country Tamils working in 20 rice mills in Dambulla.

In mid-March the Central Provincial Council highlighted the current procedure which bars non-worker residents to apply for identity cards through estate management and urged police to accept affidavits or employers' letters for identification.

Tamil arrests in the capital mount *Closing down Colombo*

FORTY Tamils from Batticaloa who arrived in Colombo to travel to the Middle East for employment were arrested by police on 15 March following a search of the capital's lodges. MPs say they had undergone rigorous questioning at ten checkpoints en route and produced all relevant documents.

According to human rights agencies many hundreds of Tamils are arrested every day in Colombo and suburbs. Assessing the number of detentions has become difficult because of the arbitrary nature of the arrests. Despite police claims that most people are released on the same day, many are held in custody until clearance is received from the Criminal Detection Bureau (CDB) and the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB) which may take a week or more.

London-based human rights agency Amnesty International says K Satheshkumar, a recent returnee from Saudi Arabia was arrested on 7 March and has disappeared. R Mohanadas, who

was arrested with him was traced ten days later to be held at the police headquarters. Under government directives, relatives must be informed within 24 hours of arrest and issued a receipt by police.

Tamils in Colombo face enormous difficulties despite several meetings arranged between the police and senior Tamil citizens by human rights groups. Eighty five Tamil refugee families living in huts near the sea shore in Wellawatte were driven out by security forces on 11 March and 26 men taken into custody.

A number of arrests have also taken place in other southern areas. In a day-long operation in Anuradhapura on 9 March, the police arrested 250 Tamils and detained 40. Three Tamils who went from Colombo to the Assistant Indian High Commission in Kandy to obtain visas were arrested on 12 March. Four more youths were held in Bandarawela in late March.

Police suspect several LTTE suicide

bombers among Colombo's 150,000 Tamil refugee population are preparing to launch attacks on senior politicians and property. Seven time bombs were found under a culvert in Mutuwal on 4 March. Following the detection of a cache of arms hidden in the ceiling of a shop on Kathiresan Street in Pettah four days later 30 people were taken into custody. Police say these weapons arrived from northern Sri Lanka in 1994. Three more bombs weighing 30kg were discovered in Old Moor Street on 19 March.

Security forces remain on high alert and security measures have been intensified after a massive bomb explosion in January killed over 80 people in Pettah, the business heartland of Colombo. Police say M Indirakumar from Amparai arrested in Modera is an LTTE supply officer and claim that eight more Tiger agents are in custody. The Army fired on a bus which failed to stop at a checkpoint at Wattala on 12 March on the Colombo-Negombo road, injuring four passengers.

Silent witness

A damning report published in March entitled *Silent War: Censorship and the Conflict in Sri Lanka*, by the London-based international centre against censorship Article 19, says that since the People's Alliance was elected to office, none of the promised legal and institutional reforms to strengthen freedom of expression have been implemented. Article 19 also says that its concerns over the control of free expression and information by the LTTE have deepened.

The law on criminal damage is used to harass journalists and censorship has resurfaced culminating in the ban of SJ Tambiah's book *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka*. Article 19 has raised concerns about use of Emergency regulations to stifle freedom of expression and the consistent pattern of public attacks on local and international NGOs, in some instances physical attacks following verbal attacks by the government.

A US State Department report says the government and the LTTE are using excessive force and human rights violations are on the increase since war resumed in April 1995. The report points

out that the three presidential commissions on disappearances have inquired into only 7,600 out of 61,300 complaints.

The presidential commissions are investigating disappearances after 1

January 1988. The reports of an earlier commission and the current commissions have not been made public. Human rights agencies are concerned that despite investigation by the commissions, disappearances continue. The UN Working Group on Disappearances in its 1996 report says it has received reports of 36 cases of disappearances in 1995.

In July last year the UN Human Rights Committee condemned the law under which special presidential commissions are appointed. The commissioners are appointed by the President and therefore are not impartial. Hearsay evidence is admissible before the commission and there is no appeal. International Commission of Jurists Vice President Desmond Fernando calling for the repeal of the law in early March, sharply criticised the conduct of the Commission into the murder of President Chandrika's husband Vijaya Kumaranatunge. The Commission points an accusing finger at former President R Premadasa claiming he licensed a cover-up by appointing a hand-picked team of investigators. As it turns out at the time of the assassination, Premadasa was not the president.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas.

If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact

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British Refugee Council
Charity No. 1614576
Company No. 2727314

ISSN 0955-5943
Funded by voluntary agencies worldwide.
Technology by R&K DTP
Printed by Printco, 374 Willesden High Rd,
London NW10