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Mannar refugee misery

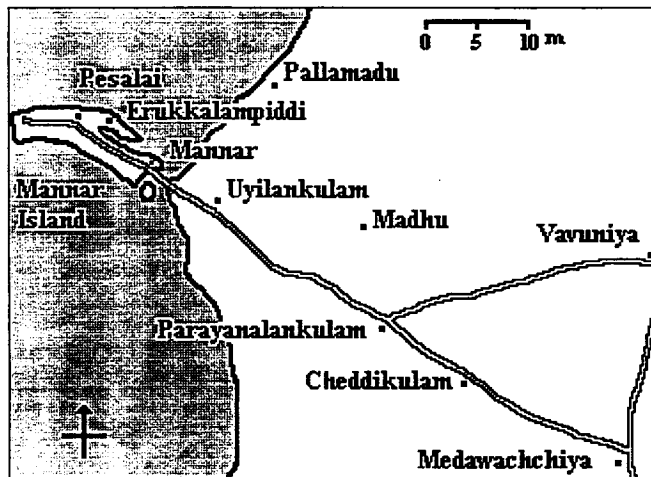
A new refugee crisis is brewing in Army-held north-western Mannar as some 10,000 people who arrived from the rebel-controlled Vanni are stranded in the district without adequate basic needs such as food, shelter and drinking water. As part of the rigorous security measures in the run-up to the 50th independence celebrations on 4 February, the military announced the suspension of entry into Vavuniya and passage from Mannar to Colombo to prevent infiltration by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Around 6,000 refugees want to return to Jaffna, 4,000 of whom are in Pesalai and Erukkalampiddi refugee camps on Mannar Island. The remaining 4,000 want to travel to Colombo, Vavuniya or the east for various reasons including medical treatment. Around 125 new students for Jaffna teacher training colleges are stuck in a church in Thalvupadu.

Some have found accommodation in lodges but many are left to live in the open. Prices in the district are steeply rising and those in lodges have spent all their money on food and accommodation since arriving in Mannar. People prefer to make the four-hour boat journey to Kurikadduvan, 40 miles north, from where a boat service is available to Jaffna, rather than suffer in Mannar.

Refugees in camps are provided food but lack other needs, particularly milk food for children. Health and sanitary facilities are minimal and relief agencies are struggling to cope. Many refugees are now seeking jobs in Mannar, but are finding it difficult to obtain the mandatory police work permits.

Displaced people in the Vanni rushed to Mannar following reports that ship services to the north, suspended in October, would resume in February. Passenger shipping from Mannar and Trincomalee to Jaffna were affected after



the LTTE began targeting cargo ships in July last year. *Sea Tigers* sank two naval vessels on 22 February off Point Pedro in Jaffna killing over 60.

Over 2,000 people are at Uyilankulam living under trees without food and dependant on one well for water. Only 375 people a week are currently admitted into Mannar. Another 3,000 who want to go to Vavuniya returned to LTTE-held Pallamadu after the Army at Uyilankulam turned them back.

Essential Services Secretary MI Rafeek doubts that ship services to Jaffna will resume in the near future, because shipping companies are reluctant to undertake services over fears of safety. But reports say applications from two Colombo shipping agents to commence services from Trincomalee and Mannar are with the Ministry of Shipping.

Police permits are needed to travel from Mannar to southern areas, including Colombo. Obtaining travel permits can take several weeks, sometimes months, which the police say is due to delays in approval from the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB). In February most passengers to the south with permits were turned back at the Cheddikulam checkpoint on the Mannar-Medawachchiya road. Others spent many hours at the checkpoint while papers were checked and passengers filmed on video.

On 25 February, 55 people left Iluppaikadavai, 14 miles north of Mannar, in three boats for Rameswaram in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu where there are over 70,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in camps. After arrival, they realised that they had been deceived and left near Talaimannar naval base on Mannar Island. The Navy, fearing a Tiger attack, opened fire killing P Palraj, 23. The people say they decided to go to India because of extreme suffering in the Vanni caused by lack of

food and medicines and also after the military at Uyilankulam denied them entry into Mannar.

In Vavuniya, 12,000 people from the Vanni who are held in government camps continue to suffer insanitary and crowded conditions. Most have been denied permission by the security forces to travel to Colombo or other southern areas. The military claims the restriction is necessary to protect the south from LTTE suicide bombers. The moderate Tamil United Front (TULF) says Vavuniya Tamil School refugee camp resident Rajendran Jeyachandran, 19, committed suicide because he did not have money to buy medicine for his diseased mother. According to the police, another refugee committed suicide in Sithamparapuram camp on 9 February.

Reports say the whereabouts of S Tharmapalasingham and K Senthilkumar, arrested by the Army at Poonthottam camp on 23 January, are unknown. According to TULF leader M Sivasithamparam no receipts were issued to relatives at the time of arrest, as required by Presidential directives under Emergency regulations. In a letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunge in February, Mr Sivasithamparam called for meaningful steps to end the misery of the displaced people.

Sri Lanka Monitor on the internet: <http://www.gn.apc.org/refugeecounciluk>

JAFFNA

Navy attack

LTTE's naval wing the *Sea Tigers* launched an attack on a convoy, north-east of Jaffna's Point Pedro on 22 February, sinking naval vessels *Pabbatha* and *Valampuri*. Over 60 security personnel died but 65 were saved by other ships. The LTTE say 11 cadre were killed in the operation.

As Navy Commander Cecil Tissera appointed a four-member committee to investigate, Trincomalee naval base employee Nalini Subramaniam was taken into custody, suspected of providing naval intelligence to the Tigers. Observers believe that the attack has serious implications for safety of ships to Jaffna as the Army struggles for the tenth month to open a land supply route through LTTE-controlled Vanni.

Jaffna's Army Commander Lionel Balagalle says the Tigers have also stepped-up attacks in the peninsula since the local election on 29 January. As Mr Balagalle met journalists on 15 February at Palaly, two soldiers were killed at Pandatharippu, eight miles west of the Airforce base.

The LTTE attacked Army positions at Gurunagar in Jaffna town three days earlier and burned a bunker. Tigers ambushed and killed seven soldiers at Mirusuvil on 16 February. Four civilians suffered injuries in a LTTE grenade attack at Kodikamam on 22 February. Three days later the naval base at Kilali came under *Sea Tiger* attack.

The Jaffna government secretariat said

in late February that landmines are affecting resettlement of displaced people. Reports say the government has approved a UN plan for clearing landmines in Jaffna, under the overall responsibility of the peninsula's Army Commander. Experts believe that 100,000 mines lie buried in Jaffna, where, 16 peoples were killed and 111 injured last year by mines.

Jaffna people are deeply concerned over clashes among Tamil groups which participated in the local elections. Three were injured when EPDP and PLOTE cadre fought in Jaffna town on 11 February. Following the incident, EPDP abducted five PLOTE members from Kayts Island west of the peninsula. Following an attack on EPDP's office in Chavakachcheri on 17 February, in which a civilian was injured, Jaffna Commander Balagalle decreed that offices for each party in Jaffna town will be restricted to one. Following complaints from the people, the Tamil parties were also barred from raising funds.

The Jaffna NGO consortium says diseases are causing concern and shortage of medicines and doctors continue. Only 20% of malathion insecticide needed to prevent malaria is currently received. According to the Jaffna Municipal Council, 41 people died of malaria and 101 of diarrhoea in 1997. Reports say 16 more people died of malaria in January this year. Last year 205 children and 14 mothers died during childbirth.

Awarded

Batticaloa resident Ehamparam Damayanthi, 15, was awarded Rs 50,000 (\$770) compensation by the Supreme Court in early February. In her fundamental rights application, Damayanthi said she was tortured and raped during Army detention under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Strike

After a nine-day strike by 600,000 plantation workers in the Hill Country from 5 February, trade unions agreed to accept Rs 101 as daily wage for tea workers and Rs 95 for rubber workers following the intervention of President Chandrika Kumaratunge. The unions had earlier demanded a raise from Rs 83 to Rs 105.

Threat

Reports in February said that in view of a number of bomb explosions in southern Sri Lanka and the security threat posed by the LTTE, the US Peace Corps, serving in the island for many years, may be withdrawn.

Talks

A six-member German parliamentary delegation, on a four-day mission to assess the current situation in Sri Lanka in late February said that attempts must be made to bring back the LTTE to the negotiating table.

Attack

Eight soldiers, including an officer were killed in a LTTE attack on an Army jeep on Medawachchiya-Mannar road on 17 February. Four other soldiers were injured.

Battle for Mankulam

OBSERVERS say the LTTE retains a six sq km area in Kilinochchi, including eastern and southern parts of the town, following major attacks on 1 February. People displaced in Army operations in September 1996, visited the town on 9 February. Ganeshalingam, 52, visiting north-west Kilinochchi was injured by Army gunfire.

People say almost all buildings in the town are damaged and many bodies lie in the streets. The Sri Lankan government denied that the town has been captured by the Tigers and took 42 journalists into the area on 18 February. Another team of journalists was allowed to the battlefield on Vavuniya-Jaffna

road where 30,000 *Operation Jayasikurui* (Certain Victory) troops are advancing through dense jungle in an attempt to encircle Mankulam, the last heavily defended Tiger town before Kilinochchi, 22 miles north.

The Army believes that *Operation Jayasikurui* is at a crucial stage having overrun the south and east access roads to Mankulam. Observers say capture of the Jaffna road splitting the Vanni would drastically affect LTTE recruitment and supply lines curbing Tiger operations in the eastern province.

The Army is said to be approaching Vavunikulam, four miles west of Mankulam on the road to Mallavi and

Thunukkai where refugees fleeing the fighting are assisted by international relief agencies. Fighting in the area would mean further displacement.

The Kilinochchi cooperative union says in a report to the Essential Services Commissioner that Rs 65 million (\$1.1 million) spent on food supply to refugees has not been reimbursed. Cultivation in 66,000 acres of land in the district has been disrupted and restriction on fuel, fertiliser and farming implements has further affected agriculture. The cooperative has called on the government to provide adequate medicines to the Vanni people, as deaths from malaria, septicaemia and diarrhoea are on the increase.

■ LTTE carries out public execution in Batticaloa

White vans

THREE Tamil youths were abducted by an unidentified armed gang in a van on 9 February at Chenkalady in Batticaloa District. The following day student T Ramanan, 16, was forced into a van in Batticaloa town and taken away.

The re-emergence of the dreaded "white vans", the hallmark of death squads linked to security forces and pro-government Tamil groups, is causing grave concern in the district. Batticaloa MP Joseph Pararajasingham says in a letter to President Chandrika that some 15 Tamils arrested by the Army or Home Guards at Weligahakandiya in Polonnaruwa District have disappeared. Ponnampalam Thavarasa, 40, and Arumugam Mylvaganam, 35, were taken

into custody at Weligahakandiya on 5 February. The Army is denying their arrests. The whereabouts of three villagers from Urugamam detained by the Army in the same area on 14 June are still unknown.

Search operations were intensified in February following suspicion that suicide bombers who launched attacks in Colombo and Kandy arrived from Batticaloa. All heavy vehicles are currently held for 24 hours at Mannampitiya, 30 miles west of Valaichenai. Seven Tamil youths were taken into police custody in Batticaloa market on 9 February. Security forces searched villages around Valaichenai on 16 February. Over 50 people were taken

to the Valaichenai Army camp and after interrogation five were detained.

The Tigers fired a number of shells into Batticaloa town on 4 February disrupting independence celebrations and wounding 14 security personnel. Four civilians were injured at Karayakkantivu when the Army retaliated. Five other people were shot and injured at Valaichenai on the same day after a policeman was wounded by a shell.

LTTE's *Pistol Group* shot dead alleged police informant R Jeevaratnam at Arayampathy on 18 February. The following day, V Mathuraiveeran, accused of links with the Army was killed in Sithandy. Reports say LTTE's women cadre publicly executed Thamotharam Baheerathan, 24, on 21 February at Echamtivu.

In Amparai District, two youths were shot dead on 16 February in Maruthamunai. Police say they opened fire on a checkpoint. The LTTE shelled Sugathagama in Central Camp on 20 February killing seven Home Guards and a civilian. Some houses were damaged.

In Trincomalee District, student A Sivapragasam was killed when LTTE attacked Tamil Group EPDP's office in the town on 21 February. A policeman and five Home Guards were killed on 24 February at Kaluvanwila in Padaviya, north-west of Trincomalee. Forty one policemen and Home Guards involved in the killing of eight Tamil civilians in Thambalakamam on 1 February were identified and detained.

human rights

US-BASED agency Human Rights Watch says in its report for 1997 that international relief agencies face obstacles when attempting to operate in conflict areas in Sri Lanka. At least two agencies were barred from operating in the eastern province for several months and the prohibition did not appear to be motivated by security concerns. International agencies were allowed to work only with government institutions in Army-held Jaffna and not permitted cooperation with local independent NGOs. This policy discouraged some agencies from seeking permission to work in the Jaffna peninsula and caused others to withdraw. The report also says arbitrary arrests, torture, rape, extra-judicial executions and some new disappearances of Tamil civilians by members of the security forces and armed groups working alongside the military, continued in 1997. The LTTE was also accused of arbitrary killings of civilians and taking hostages.

The US State Department's human rights report for 1997 classifies impunity as a serious problem in Sri Lanka. It observes that no arrests were made in connection with large number of disappearances in Jaffna. The lack of progress in some cases and investigation or prosecution in others gave the impression of immunity for those responsible for human rights abuses.

The report says that torture by security forces is another serious problem. Methods of torture included electric shock, beatings, suspension by wrists or feet, burnings and near drownings. Victims were forced to remain for extended periods with bags laced with chillie, petrol or insecticide over their heads. Detainees have reported broken bones and other serious injuries as a result of mistreatment.



Election blast

SEVENTEEN bombs exploded at Coimbatore in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on 14 February in the run-up to general elections, killing 54 people and wounding over 200. Police blame Muslim groups for the blasts which occurred shortly before the arrival of Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader LK Advani.

Over 605 million voters were scheduled to vote in four stages for the 543 seats in the lower house of parliament *Lok Sabha*. India's United Front government collapsed in November after Congress (I) withdrew its support over demands to sack Tamil Nadu's DMK party which was implicated by the Jain Commission in the 1991 assassination of

Rajiv Gandhi. Observers are not expecting the BJP to gain absolute majority in parliament in the current elections and predict a hung parliament.

The BJP-AIADMK alliance in Tamil Nadu won 30 of the 39 *Lok Sabha* seats while the ruling DMK-TMC coalition which won all 39 seats in the last election, managed only nine. BJP-AIADMK alliance members Y Gopalasamy's MDMK and Ramdoss's PMK which were routed at the last election, gained seven seats. Gopalasamy and Ramdoss have for many years remained strong supporters of the Sri Lankan Tamil cause and the LTTE. Their triumphant comeback will be viewed with concern across the Palk Strait in Colombo.

Police evict 600 Tamils from Colombo lodges **Black Tiger in Slave Island**

HOURS after Britain's Prince Charles left Sri Lanka on 6 February, a woman *Black Tiger* blew herself at a checkpoint in Colombo's Slave Island suburb, killing five security personnel and three civilians. The target may have been Air Force Commander Oliver Ranasinghe who had passed the checkpoint only a few minutes earlier. Police say the suicide bomber Ganesan Indrani was arrested at a Kotahena suburb lodge on 2 February and later released.

The police closed down three Kotahena lodges, evicting 600 Tamils from north-east Sri Lanka. EPDP leader Douglas Devananda, who found them temporary accommodation, condemned the police action as arbitrary and inhuman. Evicted couple Thambithurai and Thavamani came from Jaffna to find their son, arrested eight months earlier in a Colombo lodge.

According to Colombo newspapers security for senior government leaders, including Foreign minister Lakshman

Kadirgamar has been strengthened fearing LTTE suicide attacks. Reports also say 24 Tigers planning to blow-up Kelaniya bridge in north-west Colombo were arrested in Vavuniya.

Tamil parties continue to complain about harassment. Several Tamils visiting the independence exhibition at the Bandaranaike Conference Hall were taken into custody. Colombo newspaper *Sunday Times* reports about Joubert Gnanamuthu, arrested at a checkpoint and locked-up without food or water for many hours before being produced in courts. The police had handed over his identity card to a lawyer who insisted on representing him for Rs 1,500.

Observers say corrupt police officers earn large sums of money by detaining Tamils. A Tamil in Colombo told the *Sri Lanka Monitor* that a businessman relative arrested twice in the course of two months paid Rs 25,000 on each occasion to the police. Over 100 lawyers say in a petition that Tamil attorney S

Selvagunapalan, working for a human rights NGO, was arrested on 10 February despite producing his identity card and humiliated at a police station.

Colombo Tamil residents complain that police are photographing them during night search operations. EPDP leader Douglas Devananda says in a letter to President Chandrika that photographing women in their night dress is humiliating and degrading and has called for immediate end to the practice.

Meanwhile, 190 Sri Lankans, including 178 Tamils, deported from Africa's Senegal were taken into custody on 25 February at Colombo airport. International refugee agency UNHCR says that police detention is to identify those with LTTE links, send a public message that there should be no attempt to leave Sri Lanka illegally and find the organisers of refugee moves. UNHCR confirms that all were released on bail under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and ordered to appear in courts in May.

Freedom of expression under fire

FIVE armed men, forced their way into *Sunday Times* columnist Iqbal Athas's Colombo home on 12 February and threatened him and his family. Mr Athas was targeted following critical comments in his weekly Situation Report, on corruption in the acquisition of military equipment, particularly the role of Airforce chief Oliver Ranasinghe.

Air Marshall Ranasinghe is accused of earning millions of dollars in purchasing aircraft and communication systems. Four days after the Athas incident, police broke into the home of Sinhala newspaper *Dinamina* journalist Pradeep Dharmaratne and beat him up for writing about a booming clandestine liquor trade in the Aranayake area. Police also interrogated two journalists who reported the trade union strike on tea plantations in February. China's *Xinhua* new agency correspondent Jin Hui was detained for a day in late February for misreporting a LTTE attack on the Navy in the north.

Observers are concerned that freedom of expression which the People's Alliance government pledged to protect is increasingly under fire, as the Sri

Lankan media continues to expose corruption in high places. While a Parliamentary Select Committee considers media law reform, current laws are being used to discipline journalists.

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.

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Editor of Sinhala journal *Lakbima* Bandula Padmakumara indicted of criminal defamation of President Chandrika was acquitted by Colombo's High Court on 5 February. In a fundamental rights application Sinhala journal *Ravaya* editor Victor Ivan says that the Attorney General (AG) is prosecuting him indiscriminately for criminal defamation, harassing and violating his freedom of expression. *Ravaya*, which exposed corruption in the previous Sri Lankan regime, has published a number of articles questioning the conduct of the AG in cases involving politicians and senior officers in the present government.

In February, New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists called on the President to demonstrate government's commitment to a free press by apprehending those responsible for the attack on Mr Athas. President Chandrika introduced new Emergency regulations on 17 February, prohibiting publication of photographs showing persons killed or injured by an act which constitutes an offence under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.