

Tamil masses in the north of Sri Lanka protest cuts in food rations

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The Tamil masses, trapped in the racist war in the Mulaithivu and Killinochchi districts of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, are protesting against cuts in food rations imposed by the government in Colombo. A parliamentary debate on the cuts in dry rations has revealed how the People's Alliance (PA) government is using food as a weapon against the Tamil population in the north and east of the country. This has been further exposed in a letter from four bishops to the president of Sri Lanka.

Since July 1, according to official figures, rations for the Tamils, already suffering from dire malnutrition and hunger, have been cut by nearly one-third. According to Tamil parliamentarians, however, the reduction has been on the order to two-thirds.

A joint letter from the bishops of Jaffna, Mannar, Killinochchi and Mulaithivu to President Chandrika Kumaratunga stated: 'Due to the dry ration cuts, people in the Vanni area are at the edge of death by starvation. If the government wants to stop this kind of death, it must grant relief as before'.

Jaffna bishop Dr. Thomas Savuadaranayagam stated further: 'Recently I made a visit to the Mulaithivu and Killinochchi areas and witnessed their grievances. Due to the sudden cut in dry rations people are not in a position to take two meals a day.'

The bishop of the Mannar district said in his letter to President Kumaratunga: 'The government has suddenly requested the Killinochchi and Mulaithivu district people to move on to the Jaffna and Mannar districts. It has stated relief will be provided if they come over there.... People in the Jaffna and Mannar districts prefer to go to other places. In such a situation the request of the government is unique.'

According to government figures, revealed by an air marshal to a bourgeois paper, the total number of war refugees is 800,845 belonging to 195,100 families. Of these 796,079 persons are in so-called welfare centers and 4,766 persons are with friends and relatives. Thus on an island whose total population is 18 million, one out of every 22.5 persons is a refugee.

There are about 415,000 war refugees in the Vanni area alone. Of these, 300,000 had to flee to Vanni on the orders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) when the PA government started war operations in the Jaffna Peninsula in April 1995. Another 115,000 became refugees because of the war in the Vanni area itself. As a result of the cuts in rations now imposed by the government, only 190,000 will receive food aid in future.

The June issue of *Sri Lanka Monitor*, an organ of the British Refugee Council, reported that the decision to cut dry rations to refugees was taken following a meeting between the president and the Essential Services commissioner. According to official figures, food aid has been slashed by as much as 40 percent in Jaffna, 20 percent in Killinochchi and Mulaithivu, and 15 percent in Vavuniya and Mannar.

Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) member of parliament Dr. N. Thiruchelvam, contradicting the official figures, revealed that out of 39,000 refugee families, only 13,000 would get rations after the cut. In the Killinochchi district, 50 percent of the food aid is slashed. The government officials were in a dilemma as to how the eligible families were to be selected.

Meanwhile, because of the mass protest, government offices have come to a standstill. The government's food department used to buy food from peasants in the Mulaithivu district to be distributed as rations. Now, due to lack of funds, government officials are unable to buy the food and the peasants are having problems selling their produce. They are unable to transport the produce to other areas.

Even at the previous level of rations, refugees were able to prepare only two miserable meals a day, one of which was normally a porridge. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, reviewing the situation, expressed 'grave concern'.

The UN agency in its report on Sri Lanka dated May 13, 1998--exactly one year after the present 'Jayasikuru' (Victory Assured) war operation was launched--stated: 'The committee further observed that it is alarmed by the results of an independent survey estimating the incidence of the

under-nourishment of women and children living in these shelters to be as high as 70 percent, and by reports in this regard that food assistance is being deliberately held back by the government as against Tamil fighters and refugees.'

The report said that people had no basic sanitation, education or health care, and suggested, among other things, reassessing food assistance with a view to improving nutritional standards, at least with regard to children and expectant and nursing mothers.

According to a report by the UNICEF Program Officer in Sri Lanka, Dr. Hiranthi Wijemanna, delivered at a workshop on August 19 in Colombo, 50,000 children have been killed due to the war and 150,000 children displaced.

People are also suffering from lack of medicine. 'There is not even Panadol for the sick,' one parliamentarian said. Epidemics of malaria, typhoid and diarrhea are common among refugees, and people are dying because they are unable to obtain proper medicine.

The government justifies the cuts

In a parliamentary debate on August 20, the Deputy Defence Minister, General Anuruddha Ratwatte, callously brushed aside the accusation that the government was using food as a weapon in the war. He tried to justify the cut-down of food rations by alleging that these supplies were going into the hands of the LTTE. He said that even though the statistics were prepared by government officials, they did so in consultation with the LTTE.

As the mass protests in the north mounted, the government announced that it would restore the ration for Mannar and Jaffna districts. However, it said nothing about Mulaithivu and Killinochchi districts.

This is not the first time the PA government has used food as a weapon in its racist war against the Tamil masses. Government agents were prohibited from giving food aid to 60,000 refugees who fled to Vanni from Jaffna following the 'Rivirasa' (Sunshine) war operation in April 1996. In May 1997 the government arbitrarily reduced the number of aid recipients from 420,000 to 185,000, even though UN agencies had estimated there were 310,000 needy persons. This measure was aimed at forcing the refugees to return to Jaffna after the peninsula was taken over by the Sri Lankan forces.

It is true that a large portion of the food supply is grabbed by the LTTE. This organization does not care about the lives of the masses. Its only concern is to extract an agreement from the PA regime for the establishment of a separate state in the north and east, under LTTE control. But the ruling class in Sri Lanka and the PA government use the LTTE's confiscation of food aid as a pretext to intensify its racist

oppression.

Another argument of the government is that it does not have the money to grant food aid amounting to 240 million rupees a month. But in the last week of August, the PA government obtained 8 billion rupees in supplementary funds for the war against the Tamils.

The additional allocation of money means two things: that the government has exhausted in the space of seven months its budgetary allocation for the year; and it plans to escalate its military attacks in the coming months. The government's declared aim is either to weaken the LTTE and bring it to the negotiating table, or totally defeat the separatist guerrilla movement. Escalation of the war means more killings and more brutal conditions for the Tamil masses.

The US and other imperialist governments support the PA regime's so-called 'war for peace'. At the same time the ruling class uses the war to intensify the military and police oppression of the masses in the south. For its part, the LTTE seeks to gain privileges for the Tamil bourgeoisie and create a statelet in which it can exploit the Tamil masses, in collaboration with international finance capital.

The working class and oppressed in Sri Lanka must campaign internationally for an end to this racist war, for the withdrawal of armies from the north and east, and for the securing of the democratic rights of the Tamil nation. The brutal conditions of the war show the necessity to forge the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil working class to fight for a union of socialist republics of Sri Lanka and Ealam, as part of a socialist republic of the Indian subcontinent.



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