

Sri Lanka: Protests continue against cuts in food supplies to Tamil war refugees

Our correspondent
1 December 1998

Tamil refugees in Vanni are on a continuous protest against the cut of their food rations by the People's Alliance government since July this year. Reduction of food rations has created conditions of mass starvation and aggravated the malnutrition among war refugees. Refugees are continuing a protest in front of the Government Agent's (GA) office at Mulaithivu, including a fast for more than 60 days, to mark their opposition.

As there was no response from the government, masses organised demonstrations last Friday, November 13. Demonstrations which began at Karathuraipattu, Oddusuddan and Visvamadu concluded at the Mulaithivu GA office. The refugees also signed a petition and sent it to the secretary general of the United Nations and the general secretary of the World Food Program through the Mulaithivu GA. They have stated in that petition that the food aid cuts cannot be in any way justified, and constitute collective punishment of the people.

The government cut the dry rations to refugees from July this year. The PA government--as has the UNP government earlier--uses food as a weapon in the racist war, throwing hundreds of thousands of Tamil people, including small children, into mass starvation.

According to the reports from Vavuniya government officials, there are approximately 400,000 Tamil refugees in Vanni alone. But the Commissioner General of Essential Services, through whom the food aid is distributed, gives a much lower number of 295,000, and claims they received rations until June this year. But from July even this number is claimed to have been reduced to 193,163. This meagre food aid is not enough to feed the people. Now the GA of the area has planned to halve the rations and to distribute them 'equally'. These figures are manipulated in order to

deprive vast numbers who are in dire need of food.

For example, there are 39,000 refugee families in Mulaithivu, but only 13,000 families receive rations. A similar situation prevails in the Killinochchi, Mannar and Vavuniya districts. Earlier the bishops of Jaffna, Mannar, Mulaithivu and Killinochchi sent a joint letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga appealing for an end to the starvation. The government has not heeded these mass protests or appeals, and the decision to cut the rations was taken by the authorities with the approval of the president herself.

The government tries to justify the cuts in food aid, saying that the GA's figures are much higher than the actual number of refugees, and that the 'LTTE has been siphoning away a substantial part of these food supplies'.

The government says even though the figures given by the GA for Killinochchi and Mulaithivu are 28,000 and 39,000 respectively, the actual figures are 8,300 and 13,000. At the same time, the government says the refugees are in 'uncleared areas' by the government forces. The question then arises how the government obtained these figures from 'uncleared areas' which are under the control of the LTTE, bypassing the GA in these areas. The fact is that the PA government has taken a decision to throw these masses into starvation.

Reports from Vanni show because of the unhealthy conditions and starvation a cholera epidemic is rapidly spreading in the area. According to a UN report, 70 percent of people in the northern province, most of them women and children, are suffering from malnutrition. Malaria, typhoid and diarrhoea are prevalent in these areas.

When the Sri Lankan army was gaining ground in the Jaffna Peninsula in 1996, the LTTE forced these people to flee to Vanni promising that the LTTE would look

after them. Now the LTTE has turned a blind eye to their social conditions.

Brutal conditions faced by the refugees in the Vanni area show not only the barbaric consequences of the racist war of the PA government, but also the reactionary and bankrupt nature of the separatist politics of the LTTE and how these have led the Tamil masses into a blind alley.

Meanwhile a case was taken up against 21 soldiers in a Colombo high court on November 17 on charges of mass murder at a village called Mylankanai in the Batticaloa district of the Eastern Province. The massacre was carried out in 1992, the day after the killing of a major general of the Sri Lankan army in a tiny island of Jaffna Peninsula. The government was forced to file a case against the soldiers after a long period of protests. The army from a nearby camp went to the village and killed 35 innocent civilians, injured others and torched the huts of the villagers.

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