

Sri Lankan government steps up attacks on Tamil civilians in the north

Vijitha Silva
7 September 1999

The Sri Lankan government blockaded the Tamil population in parts of the Wanni region, an area controlled by the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for more than six weeks, imposing much suffering on the local population. On August 9, as starvation spread throughout the area and opposition mounted among those stranded on both sides, government forces and the LTTE finally agreed, after much haggling, to allow the transport of food and other supplies through the area.

When LTTE fighters attacked a military checkpoint at Uliyankulam, a village which is situated to the west of Vavunia, an important border town in the Northern province, the government forces moved June 26 to close down the only route linking government-controlled and LTTE-controlled areas in Wanni.

Tamil people from LTTE-controlled territory travel through LTTE and military checkpoints to Vavunia where they buy essentials, collect funds sent by relatives living abroad and make connection with the outside world. Those who want medical treatment in Colombo, Vavunia or Anuradhapura hospitals have to come by this route.

The sudden closure of the road stranded more than two thousand people who had traveled to Vavunia and unknown number in the LTTE areas. People stranded in Vavunia were kept in a camp by the government authorities without food. They did not have a change of clothing or money.

As the situation worsened those stranded staged two protests outside the chief government administrative office in Vavunia demanding arrangements be made so that they could return to their homes. On July 12, Jaffna University students also held a demonstration, which was blocked by the military. The students demanded that arrangements be made for fellow students to return

from Vavunia. The protests were directed against the government and the LTTE.

The Peoples Alliance government, like its predecessor the United National Party (UNP), uses hunger as a weapon in its racist war against the Tamil masses. As some smuggled photographs demonstrate, conditions similar to Somalia and Ethiopia are emerging in the Wanni area as hunger, malnutrition and epidemics continue.

According to the chief government administrative officers, or GAs, there are about 300,000 in the area displaced by the racist war: in Killinochchi district 64,558 persons from 15,756 families; in Mulativu district 97,878 persons from 23,775 families; in Mannar district 5,447 families in LTTE-controlled areas and 7,580 families in areas controlled by government forces.

Even though the Peoples Alliance government sent "humanitarian aid" to people displaced by its military actions, the supplies were insufficient to alleviate hunger in these areas. Closure of the road meant that these scant supplies were also stopped. Head of the Sri Lankan branch of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), issued a statement on July 26 noting, "The ICRC is deeply concerned that the health condition and nutritional status of large segments of the civilian population depending on the GA's assistance will further deteriorate... Stocks of essential items in the Wanni are extremely low, if not empty of commodities such as flour, sugar, and milk powder.

"Patients cannot be transferred to Vavunia hospital. As a result four of them died during the last few weeks... The present situation is severely hampering the services and activities in favor of the civilian population provided by the ICRC, other international organizations and the government servants active

across the line."

Just before the opening of a route to Wanni, the Sri Lanka government transferred the GAs for Killinochchi and Mulativu, because they issued statements regarding the plight of the Wanni people. Newly appointed officers have been advised not to issue such statements and to follow the instructions of the military authorities.

The Sri Lankan government claims to have taken various steps to rehabilitate Tamils in Jaffna and rebuild infrastructure devastated by the war. But a recent discussion of the Jaffna District Coordinating Committee, comprised of members of parliament in the district, revealed that insufficient funds have been allocated for "reconstruction and rehabilitation" work this year. Some 53.3 million rupees (about US\$710,000) were cut from education spending, and Rs. 70 million (about US \$1million) cut from health care. The government claims that there was no request for funds. Last year about Rs. 160 million was allocated for rehabilitation work in Jaffna but Rs. 60 million was later credited back to the ministry without being spent.

At the same time the Peoples Alliance government tried to cut food aid to Tamil people, by placing "non-income earners" in the Samurdhi Program (a meager financial assistance system). Under this program 90,000 people in Jaffna would face a cut in their food aid. The reason given by the government was that the situation in Jaffna peninsula had become "normal". The people of Jaffna not only live under military rule, but also face scarcity and high prices for essentials.

The starvation tactics are combined with new acts of repression, ranging from arrests to rape and murder of Tamil civilians in the North and East. On August 11, two fishermen were killed by the navy while they were fishing near a small island in the Jaffna lagoon. Sebastianpillai Jeyakumar, 36 years old, and Anthonypillai Christhuvarajah, 45, were shot while catching prawns early in the morning. The navy turned their bodies over to the hospital after an eight-hour delay. Even though the navy said that the two men were suspected of being LTTE cadres, the Gurunagar Fisherman's Association confirmed that they were fishermen and members of the association.

The government banned fishing in the sea around Northern Province as part of its racist war measures, depriving tens of thousands of Tamils of their livelihood. Recently the regime allowed fishermen to

fish in shallow waters, but required that they wear only a loincloth while at work.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact