Sri Lankan forces to expand military base on the Jaffna peninsula

Sarath Kumara
24 September 1999

The Sri Lankan military is bulldozing all houses in an extensive area around the Palaly military complex in the embattled Jaffna peninsula, as part of a plan to greatly expand the base. Eyewitnesses have said that heaps of rubble litter the area. The entire population of this area have been displaced during the war against the Tamil separatist movement, the LTTE, and now have no prospect of returning to their homes.

Palaly is the main military base in the Jaffna peninsula from where the Sri Lankan Army and Airforce operate in the war against the LTTE over control of the Tamil-populated Northern and Eastern provinces of Ceylon. In 1995-96 the Peoples Alliance (PA) government initiated a new phase of the war in which it captured control of the peninsula, including Jaffna, the region's largest city.

However there is still no land access route from the government-controlled South to Jaffna, because an intervening part of the Northern province is still controlled by the LTTE. Palaly therefore is vital as the main supply base for the military, as well as providing the only civilian access to air transport to the South.

The Jaffna government agent has declared an area covering 30 divisions in the Thelippilli district a high security zone. This area includes Palaly, Kollankaladdy, Vasavilan, Myliddy north and south, and the Thelippilli villages. A previous such notice was issued under the former government of the United National Party in 1986-87, but the UNP was unable to enforce it and take control of the land.

The PA government moved quite surreptitiously and issued the order to lower-level officers only after former residents kept on pressing to be allowed to return to their homes. Since they had been forcibly kept out, the people could not see what had been going on in the area. They were told by the military authorities that the area had been heavily mined by the LTTE, but the demolition of homes is continuing even though the mine clearing is well advanced.

The first indications that the PA intends to complete the former UNP regime's plans to acquire the area and expand the military base came in March this year. After protests by non-governmental organisations, religious organisations and Tamil political parties, President Chandrika Kumaratunga promised not to implement the plan immediately.

The official notification on the land acquisition was signed by the acting minister of Agriculture and Land on June 8, 1999, but made available to the public only on August 28. The contents of this act are the same as those of the original UNP notification. An official of Vali North Displaced Persons' Welfare Society told this reporter that the only difference between the two notifications was the date and the signature.

This organisation of displaced former residents sent a letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga on September 4, protesting the demolition of homes and the plans to acquire the land permanently for military use. There has been no reply.

The arbitrary acquisition of this land and the bulldozing of dwellings has exposed the government's claim that after the Jaffna peninsula came under its control, people would enjoy a more civilised rule. Similar clearing has been carried out around the Karainagar navy camp as well.

This is but one instance of how the democratic rights of the masses are being trampled underfoot by the PA government. Under conditions where mass hostility to the occupying regime is growing apace, the government has no means other than increasing repression, using military force.

The people in this area have been battered by the war

© World Socialist Web Site

for two decades. Of the 25,351 families with 83,618 people who once lived in the Valikamam North division (in the Jaffna peninsula) only 4,434 families with 15,688 people remain. The rest, 67,950 people making up 20,917 families, have been made refugees. Most of the houses situated in this area have been destroyed. Even the government records admit that 75 percent of the families have been dispersed.

From these families, only one-third live in the Jaffna peninsula today; the others are scattered. While a few moved in with relatives or friends, most live in the refugee camps. The resettlement allowance for each family is a mere Rs. 5,000 (US$75).

Before the war the people in this area, whose main livelihood is agriculture, enjoyed relatively tolerable living conditions. This is the most fertile area in the Jaffna peninsula, with farms and vineyards. A great deal of vegetables and fruit were grown here and marketed in Colombo. Fifteen to twenty lorry loads of produce were taken to the South every day.

Now the peasants have been reduced to poverty, and their children have been deprived of an education. Formerly, there were four national standard schools in the area, Telippilli Mahajana College, Vasavilan Central College, the Union College and Nadeswara College, with about 9,000 students from grade one up to the advanced (high school) level. These are now all closed.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site