

Tamils in northern Sri Lanka denied food rations

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More than 90,000 families displaced due to the ongoing war in the north of Sri Lanka received none of the food rations to which they were entitled during the months of June, July and August. After protests and political agitation, distribution was restored in September. But according to an official of the Co-operative Department and the Government Agent of Jaffna, the People's Alliance government has so far not issued any instructions to continue the dry rations in October. If the food distribution is stopped, tens of thousands face starvation.

More than 600,000 people were forced to withdraw from their homes in the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka following the launching of a government military operation, Rivirasa, in mid-1996. Faced with the military offensive, the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) withdrew its own armed units and called on people to follow them to the Vanni area to the south of Jaffna lagoon.

But living conditions in the rural Vanni region have been intolerable. Due to the lack of the basic facilities, such as clean drinking water, electricity, health services and education for their children, most of the displaced Tamil families have returned to Jaffna despite the harsh military rule there.

Those who returned found their houses demolished and workplaces destroyed. Some of the destruction was the result of the scorched earth policy of the retreating LTTE. People were unable to find any means of living as most of the agricultural land had been mined by the army and the LTTE. They had no alternative but to depend on the meagre state-sponsored "dry rations" distribution, consisting of rice, flour, sugar and milk foods.

The distribution of dry rations took place twice a month on the basis of family cards. The size and value

of the rations depended on the category of the family—one member, two members, three members, and four members and above. The maximum value is 1,500 rupees or \$US22 a month.

A five-member family cardholder used to get five kilograms of sugar, flour, rice and dhal lentils twice a month. In addition, milk foods such as Lakspray milk powder were supplied to the value of 355 rupees per month for families with children. Due to poverty, most of ration cardholders were forced to sell some of the food items on the black market. "They can't exist without doing this because they need money to purchase other necessary items required for their day to day life," a Co-operative Department official told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The non-distribution of rations for three months prior to September was no accident. The Jaffna Government Agent and other officials of the state machinery were given instructions to cut the number of ration entitlements. They also tried to scrap the scheme and absorb a few of the families into "samurdhi scheme" or prosperity program, which was started by the government to support poor families elsewhere by paying a small monthly allowance.

Within the Jaffna Municipal Council limits alone, there are about 19,000 fishermen's families, settled in the Gurunagar and Paasaiur villages, of which 9,000 depend on dry rations. The Jaffna military command frequently declares a curfew and completely bans fishing in the area, creating enormous hardship for the remaining 10,000 families. To prevent protests, the government has been obliged to make relief payments of between 650 to 1,300 rupees a month.

Similarly, 20,000 peasant families from Valligamam North have been displaced by the extension to Palaly military base and the state acquisition of land around

this “high security zone”. These families are also forced to depend on the government's dry ration relief.

About 70 percent of the trade on the Jaffna peninsula is in the hands of private traders. The remaining 30 percent is carried out under the supervision of the Jaffna Government Agent and through the co-operative societies. The transportation of goods is difficult and the military has top priority for its war materials. The merchant ships from Colombo to a port in the Jaffna district like Point Pedro will bring up 300 million rupees worth of food items. But only 30 million rupees worth is for co-operative societies and the remainder is for private traders.

The co-operative societies lack the financial resources to buy and store large stocks, which are mainly for distribution to ration cardholders. As a result, private traders are able to make large profits by hoarding essential goods to force up prices. For instance, during the period from July to August, when the government stopped rations, the price of one kilogram of sugar in Jaffna was 80 rupees, five times the cost in Colombo. Lacking jobs or land, the tens of thousands of refugees in northern Sri Lanka are simply unable to afford such prices.



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