Sri Lanka:

Tens of thousands flee in the face of advancing LTTE forces

Our correspondent
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Over 10,000 men, women and children have fled their villages in the war ravaged Wanni, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya districts in the north of Sri Lanka during the last few days. The exodus is second only to the mass movement of Tamil people that took place from Jaffna into the Killinochchi district, south of the Jaffna lagoon, at the end of 1996 when Sri Lankan Army (SLA) occupied the Jaffna peninsula.

Welioya, which borders the three districts of Wanni, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya, came under threat during the first two days of November when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) overran the Odusuddan and Nedunkerni military camps. Established in the 1940s, the settlement was vastly expanded when the United National Party (UNP) regime launched its war against the Tamils in 1983. Large numbers of Sinhala families were sent there to create a buffer zone between northern-eastern region and the south. The area was originally known as Manalaru, a Tamil name. During the new setttlement in the mid-1980s it was changed to the Sinhala name of Welioya.

While the LTTE has mounted sporadic attacks on Welioya throughout the war the latest threat, and the withdrawal of Sri Lankan military from the area after suffering high casualties, is regarded as the most severe. According to reports, a group of 6,780 people fled to the southern town of Padaviya, taking refuge in nine schools. The schools lack basic amenities.

Evacuations from Vavuniya reached a peak on November 10, when the *Voice of Tigers* (LTTE) radio called on the district's residents to move to safer areas within 48 hours. Dozens of fax messages containing the same warning were also sent to all government and non-government institutions, including banks and other business enterprises, in Vavuniya. Having noticed the military move out their heavy armory and equipment a few days earlier, panic quickly spread throughout the community after the LTTE announcements.

By November 11, all the public and private businesses had downed shutters making the town appear like a ghost city. No attempt was made by police or military personal to dissuade people from leaving their homes. All the indoor patients of Vavuniya hospital fled after they learnt that 30 out of 34 doctors had already moved out.

One bank official able to travel to Colombo with his family told the *WSWS*: "We were instructed to close our bank branch and move out of Vavuniya. To the question when we are expected to return to our duties, the only reply we got from the head office was that we will be notified on that later."

He also explained that Colombo-Vavuniya trains were overflowing with people and added: "Only those who have obtained passes from the police to travel to Colombo could get train tickets. The railway station was crowded with huge numbers who could not obtain tickets because they did not have the necessary passes to do so."

Those Tamils unable to travel to Colombo have moved west from Vavuniya to Rasenthirakulam, Pavatkulam, Seethamparapuram and Veerapuram, about 6.5 to 10 kilometres from the town. Sinhala residents have moved east towards Padaviya to join those who had already shifted there from Welioya.

Babu, the recently appointed head of the Peoples Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) in Vavuniya said: "People must not take the LTTE warning seriously and move out of Vavuniya. We are

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watching the situation closely and security arrangements will be made without delay." Babu claimed that PLOTE would send 300 armed cadres to protect Vavuniya residents. But both the Tamil- and Sinhala-speaking people in the area have not heeded this advice, even at the risk of facing miserable living conditions once displaced from their villages.

Worst affected are those in Vavuniya's refugee camps. Having fled Killinochchi after the SLA attacked it in 1997, the refugees have temporary government passes but are prohibited from leaving the camps for more than 24 hours. These conditions have not been waived, despite the danger of imminent LTTE attack. It is almost as if the SLA is using these people as human shields in the face of the LTTE offensive.

The Ministry of Rehabilitation provides camp residents with a daily payment of Rs. 32 (US 40 cents), for an adult, and Rs. 20 for a child. But with Vavuniya traders having closed their shops and fled the area, the refugees cannot buy anything with the pittance provided by the government.

Those who moved west from Vavuniya toward Mannar are reported to be living under trees in the jungles, unable to find any buildings in the remote villages. Government authorities are yet to provide food to these refugees. Meanwhile, hundreds of additional soldiers and policemen are being sent to Vavuniya from the south.

Ruling class concern over the deepening crisis was voiced in an editorial in the *Sunday Times* on November 14. "The disruption of the civic fabric," the newspaper warned, "cannot be taken by any government as a matter of course, but that is exactly how the current dispensation seems to react to the large scale disruptions of civilian life due to its inability to maintain its writ in areas and establishments in which conflict is rife.

"It was bad enough loosing territory in the Wanni to the LTTE, but to lose the ability to maintain civilian life in a larger area in the province is an indictment on the centre, which has not been able to establish peace and stability despite the rhetoric about ending the conflict in the North and East... There is a burgeoning state of instability in the country, though it may not be overtly manifest. But creeping destabilization may be as dangerous as manifest instability..."

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