

# Tamil doctor describes suffering in Jaffna

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*The following interview was given by a Tamil doctor from Jaffna who currently serves in the Colombo National Hospital of Sri Lanka. Due to the Sri Lankan government's emergency regulations and political censorship, we cannot disclose the doctor's identity.*

"I hate this war. Like everybody I would like to live in peace. If peace is achieved I will remain in this country. Otherwise what is the use of staying?"

These are the words of a young Tamil doctor, now working in Colombo after living and studying in Jaffna, the main Tamil city in Sri Lanka's north.

Most of his life, as with other Tamil youth, has been spent under conditions of the war that the Sri Lankan government started 17 years ago in 1983 against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Since the Sri Lankan military lost the key Elephant Pass army base two months ago, he has been unable to contact his relatives or friends in the Jaffna Peninsula. The Peoples Alliance government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga has disconnected all the telephone lines in a bid to conceal the situation in Jaffna.

He knows that the medical and social conditions faced by Jaffna's people will be even worse than when he last lived there. Asked whether people have enough medical facilities in Jaffna, he replied:

"Certainly not. There are no private hospitals in Jaffna. There isn't a single nursing home with good facilities. People, whether rich or poor, have to go to the Jaffna teaching hospital. It has very low-level facilities compared with hospitals here.

"No adequate beds, no proper diagnostic facilities are available. There is no basic equipment to examine patients. There are no batteries for electrical instruments like torches, ophthalmoscopes and laryngoscopes. There are not enough sanitary facilities. If you go to a toilet, I am sure, you would not be able to eat for three days.

"The biggest problem is the failure of the government to supply adequate amounts of drugs. Only International Red Cross ships carry drugs to the teaching hospital there. If a ship does not arrive in due date, then there are no drugs for the inpatients and particularly for clinical patients suffering from hypertension, diabetics and epilepsy, who depend on regular treatments.

"Drugs like captopril, nifedepine are not available at all. If doctors prescribe the out-of-stock drugs for patients to buy outside, they can't afford them. On the one hand, drugs are very expensive in Jaffna. On the other hand, poor people can't spare the money for them, given a very high cost of living.

"I can remember several occasions where there were no suture materials available for major and urgent surgeries. All the minor surgeries had to be postponed. Sometimes suture materials were not available even for caesarian operations and childbirth. I don't know why the government is not supplying such essential items."

The cost of living in Jaffna was ever increasing. "Even with a monthly income of 8,000-9,000 rupees you find it difficult to live in Jaffna. Public servants have to do farming or other small business to survive."

Before the Sri Lankan army captured Jaffna in 1995, the Air Force indiscriminately bombed civilian areas in the city. "One bomb was dropped on the third house from ours. The LTTE camp in the area was half a mile away. Once a newspaper carried a cartoon that requested people to go to the LTTE camp because it would be the only place that wouldn't be bombed."

Once the military occupied the city, he and his fellow medical students were harassed, as was the entire population.

"Our male hostel was occupied by the Sri Lankan army, forcing us to find lodgings in rented houses. The female hostel was also occupied for some time. Army personnel, who tried to harass our female colleagues,

often searched female hostels. Every young male was viewed as an LTTEer and sometimes girls were treated the same way.

“The military conducted search operations at least once a month or when an incident occurred. People were ordered to gather at specified places and told to parade in front of a ‘muhamudi’ (a finger-man) who would point out ‘LTTE suspects’. Everybody was nervous because if he pointed to you it would be end of your life.

“Everybody had to be there more than six hours, under the heat of sun—thirsty, hungry, and of course in fear. Small children and babies were crying, adults were whispering. These repressive experiences led some people to think about joining the LTTE or leaving for abroad or somewhere else in the country.”

Before the 1995 military takeover, the LTTE had also treated people badly.

“The LTTE forcibly collected money and valuable items from us. Sometimes we had to vacate our residences or move to other places once they asked us to do so. They have connections with big businessmen there. They were also involved in businesses. They gave us less trouble compared to the Sri Lankan military, because they knew us better than the military. But ultimately both were the same.

“When the 1995 army operation began, the LTTE suddenly ordered us to vacate our houses and flee to Chavakachcheri. Whether we liked or not, we had to leave. Elderly people were reluctant to go, but the LTTE cadres shot at the sky and forced them to move.

“We had to take to the roads with what we could carry easily because the Sri Lankan military was shelling constantly. The roads were so crowded that we couldn't walk easily. People took two days to reach Chavakachcheri although the distance is less than 16 kilometres. On the way we saw some people dying and also mothers delivering their babies on the roadside. The LTTE would not allow people to go back for any reason.

“After eight months, we were forced to come back to Jaffna, though it was occupied by the military then. What did we find? Most of our houses and households had been destroyed. Our belongings, like bicycles and other vehicles, had been taken away, either by the military or LTTE supporters.”

He had also lived under the occupation of the Indian

Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) from 1987 to 1990. He summed up his experiences under the rule of the Sri Lankan government, the LTTE and the IPKF as follows: “What we have experienced is intimidation, torture and repression under different dictatorial rules. We have been deprived of all our basic human rights and needs.”

He is disgusted by the fact that his union, the Government Medical Offices Association (GMOA), supports the government's war effort. “I can't approve of the GMOA's action in contributing to the war. Earlier we thought that the GMOA was an independent union without any political allegiance. But now I have to think that the GMOA leaders have some definite politics.”



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