

Bishop denounces Sri Lankan military

Hundreds of casualties in "senseless war" on Jaffna peninsula

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A letter sent by Josep Rayeppu, the Catholic bishop of Mannar (an area in northern Sri Lanka), to foreign missions in Colombo has accused the military of causing 500 civilian casualties in fighting with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the Chavakachcheri area of the northern Jaffna peninsula. It appealed to the diplomats to “prevail upon the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to rectify the situation.”

The letter sent on June 9, and released to the press on June 12, provides details of the deteriorating conditions facing thousands in the war zone. “The Parish Priest of Chavakachcheri Rev. Ananthakumar having moved out of this trapped area with 76 families to Koanavil in Vanni via Sangupiddy-Pooneryn has contacted me from Madhu (near Mannar). He described the pathetic situation of the people being mercilessly made victims of this senseless war. Since they are trapped, they have no way of escaping from this plight.

“Few have risked their lives amidst Sri Lankan Army's heavy artillery shelling and aerial bombings to move to a safe area. This exodus takes five to six days when they cross over to Vanni via Sangupiddy-Pooneryn. In the meantime quite a number have been killed and I am given to understand that the attitude of the armed forces is that ‘it is better to kill the people than allow them to go into the LTTE controlled areas.’

“I am also informed that people who are compelled to live within the bunkers are helpless and starving. According to this source the number of civilian casualties in the Madduvil area is more than 500. This type of massacre is said to be extending to other areas of Thenmarachchi as well. The people of Meesalai, Sarasalai and Manthuvil have sought refuge in school buildings. There are 157 inmates, all sickly and helpless, housed in the Kaithadi Home for the Elders. Unfortunately, the

NGOs are not permitted by the security forces to move into these areas.”

The government has reportedly slapped a censorship ban on the letter and any articles or media reports that are based on it.

Chavakachcheri to the southeast of Jaffna town, where the LTTE forces are now entrenched, has been an area of continuous fighting. Last week the LTTE urged the International Red Cross and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to arrange a ceasefire to evacuate wounded from the area. But the government flatly rejected the appeal.

Tight government censorship has kept the world completely in the dark as to the plight of civilians on the Jaffna peninsula. In the Chavakachcheri area thousands of Tamils are trapped and unable to move out. Over the last week, the army attacked LTTE-held areas indiscriminately, using newly purchased Israeli fighter jets. The military are desperate to push back the LTTE from areas near Jaffna town and to prevent the LTTE from bombarding the strategic Palaly air base and Kankasanthurai seaport.

Tens of thousands of people who fled the fighting during the past few weeks are still in refugee camps. Out of an estimated 110,000 residents within the Jaffna municipal area, nearly 80,000 left. Of those only 30,000 have returned during the recent lull in fighting. But the situation remains tense and many are prepared to flee again at a moment's notice. When an LTTE offensive to capture Jaffna town appeared imminent, the military imposed a 24-hour curfew to prevent an exodus, perhaps calculating that they could use the civilian population as a human shield. Many people simply breached the curfew and left anyway.

About 50,000 people have been displaced from the

Maruthankerni, Thenamarachchi and Palai areas south of Jaffna town. Some 20,000 of them are in camps at Point Pedro in the northeastern part of peninsula and Chankanai, Kokuvil, Manipay and Thirunelveli in the southwest. They are crammed in temples, churches and public buildings without any facilities. Some are living with relatives and friends. People who fled from Jaffna are also living in these camps in the southwest.

A resident in Colombo last week received a letter from a friend in Jaffna, who is nearly 80. A former postmaster he became a social worker after his retirement. Written on May 14, a few days before his departure, the letter describes the atrocious conditions facing civilians on the Jaffna peninsula during the protracted civil war.

“The curfew continues, up to the time of writing this note, for the fifth day. The battlefront is about four miles away from my house and two miles away from Nallur where my brother is living. His position is precarious. So he has packed up his most essential things, and is ready to go to safe places like Manipay or Vaddukoddai or Pandetheruppu or other places in that area when the situation worsens.

“As for me I am fed up with getting displaced from my place of dwelling. So far I have got displaced from here on three different occasions and have had bitter experiences. The first displacement was in October 1987 for about a month at the Hindu Ladies College Jaffna. The second one was for about two weeks at the famous Nallur temple, Jaffna. The third was in October 1995 for about seven months at Karaveddi, 17 miles from here.

“The impact of this [last] displacement weighed very heavily on me. I suffered mentally, physically and financially. On my return in May 1996 the house was partly damaged and ransacked. Over 95 percent of my belongings especially clothes, books, furniture, household goods, kitchen utensils etc were missing. Three out of four parapet walls of the premises were razed to the ground. Whatever things I treasured and could call my own were lost.”

In a later letter, he explained that he had been displaced for a fourth time, leaving Jaffna on May 17 for Manipay, about four miles away.

Even before the current fighting began there was a shortage of food on the Jaffna peninsula. Now the situation has gone from bad to worse. Goods are rationed through co-ops. But people complain that traders have become like vultures in exploiting the situation and doubling prices. One has to pay 50 percent more for soap. The price of cycle and motor vehicle parts has increased

by 200 percent. Potatoes, transported from Colombo and bought for 24 rupees a kilo before the war, are now being sold at 125 rupees.

Due to the worsening situation all Sinhala-speaking doctors have left the hospital. According to Medicin Sans Frontiere (MSF), by the end of May Jaffna hospital had medical stocks for only 500 operations. The other main hospital at Point Pedro had stocks for only 110 operations.

An International Red Cross ship returned from Kankasanthurai port without delivering its medical stocks reportedly due to security reasons. According to the International Red Cross, it had established 15 mobile medical services and treated 1,315 people in Jaffna area. Some serious cases in the Thenamarachchi area had been transported to Vavuniya, about 100 kilometres to the south. But medical services are very limited.

The conditions for Tamil refugees who have fled to other areas are no better. About 4,000 people have been stranded in Trincomalee, a port in eastern Sri Lanka, for more than two months due to the disruption of sea transport by the war.

Refugees who have fled to the LTTE-controlled areas in the Vanni district to the south of Jaffna are lacking food and basic medicine. The government has severely restricted medical supplies to hospitals in the area and cut dry food rations to refugees by half. The monthly allocation for a family of five was previously valued at 1,260 rupees (\$US17) and has been reduced to 650 rupees (\$US9).

Just over 1,000 refugees have crossed the Palk Strait to Tamil Nadu in southern India. One of the main reasons why the exodus has not been much greater is that the Indian government has intensified its naval surveillance in the area to intercept boats carrying refugees. In Tamil Nadu, the state government has imposed a tight security screening on all newly arrived refugees and detained them in special camps. It has also initiated security checks on refugees in other parts of the state who have arrived previously.



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