

Tamil Muslims in Sri Lankan refugee camps: Victims of the 17-year civil war

A correspondent
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Tamil Muslims are among the hardest hit of the hundreds of thousands of victims of the Sri Lankan government's 17-year civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The main exodus of Tamil Muslims from Jaffna took place in 1990. As it was preparing to relaunch the war, the United National Party government began to incite clashes between Tamil Hindus and Muslims. The LTTE's response was to turn on Tamil Muslims as a whole, claiming that Muslim businessmen were stocking up arms for a "jihad" or holy war in league with the Sri Lankan army. It branded Tamil Muslims as "enemies of Tamil Eelam".

Thousands of families were forced to leave Jaffna, travelling by lorries or tractors, and then walking miles to Vavunia. These refugees spent days in camps in Vavunia and later went to camps at Anuradhapura, Dambulla and Puttlam, where Muslim communities live. For four years they lived under coconut trees in shelters covered with polythene cloth. Only later were they housed in flimsy huts where they continue to live today.

The present Peoples Alliance (PA) government has been cutting supplies and subsidies to all war refugees. Many are starving, suffering from disease and have no access to basic health and education services. In short, their lives have been devastated. The following report was submitted by a correspondent who visited several Muslim Tamil refugee camps around Puttlam.

For generations, Muslim Tamils lived alongside others in Jaffna, Vedikathevu, Periyamadu, and Mulaithivu in the Northern Province. Throughout the 17-year civil war, these people have had to leave behind lands, houses and other belongings. Many have lost all means of earning a living. Fishermen, for instance, are restricted in the hours and areas in which they are permitted to fish.

A 40-year-old father of three told me: "In 1984 an army convoy was blasted by a land mine on Hospital Street in

Jaffna, near St. Mary's church. In retaliation, from April 9 the army burnt down 20 houses and shops in Jaffna and neighbouring villages. About 200 were shot dead on the roads. My children and I only saved our lives by tracking through the jungle to a church in another area."

Another refugee said: "We don't want the war. We have lost our properties and lives because of it. Although the government says that they are fighting the LTTE, it is we, the poor and innocent, who suffer. When we were in the northeast we often had to leave our dwellings to avoid army shelling. On return, we would find our houses destroyed."

The refugees now live in conditions of extreme poverty. Hundreds of thatched huts, 12 by 10 feet in size, are located on barren land near Puttlam, a town 131 kilometres from Colombo. Thousands of other Tamil Muslim refugees are housed in similar huts in Kalpitiya, Mundalama and Vanathavillu in the Puttlam district. The settlements, which are known as "welfare centres", have nothing to do with the welfare of the inhabitants.

According to official statistics, there are 624 families in Mundalama, 2,478 in Puttlam, 3,555 in Kalpitiya and 811 in Vanathavillu. The families, who were promised 35,000 rupees (\$US450) each, as part of the village settlement program to help build homes, have only received 10,000 rupees. Authorities claim they cannot pay the balance because they have no funds. Even the full amount is not enough to build a house fit for human habitation.

For the 3,555 families in Kalpitiya, drinking water is an acute problem. Although there is one tube well for every 70 families, the wells are unusable because the water is salty. Drinking water previously provided by UNICEF was cut off on March 25, after the PA government failed to provide the district councils [local government] with the necessary funds.

A retired teacher said: "There are 18 refugee settlements in Puttlam alone and it is very difficult to find water.

Drinking water previously supplied once a week by the bowsters has stopped and now some housewives have to walk miles for water.”

The lack of clean water and proper sanitary facilities and the crowded conditions in the camps have led to serious health epidemics with diarrhea and skin diseases common among small children. The settlements have no drainage system and stagnant rainwater becomes the breeding ground for mosquitoes carrying malaria and elephantitis. Regular three-monthly mosquito eradication programs ended this year, as did the distribution of free medicine by the Red Cross.

One refugee explained: “The World Health Organisation has started a scheme to provide medicine once a month, charging 20 rupees for each patient, but they do not have all the varieties that are needed. When there is no suitable medicine they give us prescriptions, but where can we get the money to buy them?”

A nursery teacher said: “A mother gave birth to a baby in this camp, but we could not take her to a hospital because we were unable to speak Sinhalese. As the mother's condition became serious we decided to take her to Puttlam hospital. The doctor said that she needed two pints of blood, but we could only raise enough money for one pint.”

The camps do not have adequate toilet facilities—UNICEF only built one toilet per 40-50 families—thus forcing the refugees to dig their own pits. Funds promised by the authorities for the walls or roofs have failed to materialise.

Most refugee families are too poor to send their children to school. Those who can afford it, send them to the Palavi Muslim college but there are no teachers for mathematics or science. Since 1990, students have been forced to pay a 500-rupee fee and this year the fee was raised to 600 rupees.

A teacher described the situation in the nursery schools. “There are three nurseries for the camps. There are no desks, chairs, doors or windows and so the children are forced sit on polythene sheets on the floor while learning. Parents cannot afford to buy any writing materials for their children.” Nursery teachers only receive 1,000 rupees (\$US13) a month.

According to official records, no one in the camps has permanent employment and families are forced to rely on food rations or subsidies. About 6,500 families receive a fortnightly food ration under the World Food Program. Another 7,664 families are paid 630 rupees for a family of six; 504 rupees for a family of four; 308 rupees for two

members and 168 rupees for a single person—twice a month. This is barely enough for two days, let alone two weeks. The PA government wants to end the food ration, claiming that the refugees were given 4,000 rupees to start their own businesses.

Old women of 60-70 years, pregnant mothers and young women walk to Norachcholai, about 12 kilometres from the camps, to work as hired labour on small farms earning 60 or 70 rupees a day. The workers, who leave the camps at six in the morning, returning as late as eight at night, have to pay for food and other expenses.

“I work on the farmlands in Norachcholai,” a young mother explained. “We pluck crops, such as chillies, and regularly have sharp thorns stuck in our skin. Earlier we were paid on the basis of productivity but could earn only 40 rupees a day, at the most. Some employers don't pay us properly, paying us for a week and retaining the rest. The balance is only paid after several months.

“It's difficult for young men to find even manual work,” she added. “Some of them have to travel as far as Colombo, stay there, and toil from six in the morning to 10 in the night for 100 rupees.”

Government authorities, however, have made it difficult for refugees to migrate to Colombo for work. Citing security reasons, the police have made it compulsory for refugees to carry a special letter granting them permission to travel to Colombo. Only a few of the men in the refugee camps—those previously employed as public servants—have found work in Puttlam.



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