

Conditions deteriorate for Tamil masses in Jaffna

Our own correspondent
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The following article is based on reports from Jaffna peninsula, the main war zone in Sri Lanka's northern province. Although there have been no major military clashes recently, there are frequent bombing raids and indiscriminate use of multi-barrel rocket launchers by Peoples Alliance (PA) government forces in areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Sri Lankan army, which has inflicted widespread damage and constantly harasses local residents, recently killed several local youth, provoking angry protests. Thousands of local residents face serious health problems in overcrowded refugee camps and temporary shelters.

Students at Jaffna peninsula schools boycotted classes for three days last July 18 following the death of S. Sanjeevan, a student at Jaffna Hindu College. Sanjeevan was killed by the Sri Lankan armed forces on July 13, while returning home from a tuition centre. A week later, Devarajan Roman Vijayakulanathan, a 26-year-old youth, was shot and killed by the armed forces at Karanavai and three days after that, on July 23, a schoolgirl at Alvai, also in the peninsula, was sexually assaulted by government soldiers camped at Mali junction.

Several hundred students joined Sanjeevan's funeral procession and attempted to carry the coffin through his school but they were blocked and diverted along another route to the cemetery by the army. When students began boycotting classes in protest the following day, the army issued a leaflet threatening the students and claiming that Sanjeevan was a member of the LTTE. A few days later, however, the military high command in Palaly backed down, announcing that it had ordered an inquiry into Sanjeevan's killing. The mass protests also forced the military to release two students arrested for participating in the boycott.

Although there is a military stalemate in Jaffna right now, a high degree of tension exists throughout the peninsula, with thousands of local residents forced out of their homes and into refugee camps and temporary shelters by the fighting in April and May.

Thenmaraadchi, south of Jaffna town, where the state forces faced heavy attacks from the LTTE, is one of the worst affected areas. Ariyalai, Colombuthurai, Paasaiur, and Gurunagar and other areas within the Jaffna municipal council borders have also been subjected to frequent attacks by the Sri Lankan airforce. Divisional administration, post offices, the education department, food co-operatives, local banks and thousands of civilians have been forced to relocate to "safe areas" such as Vadamaradchchi, north of Jaffna. Previously well-established food co-operatives have incurred losses of over 900 million rupees.

An estimated 100,000 people have moved to Valikamam (Kankesnthurai and Manipay areas) and Vadamaradchchi (Point Pedro area). While about 45,000 have found shelter at schools, temples and other public places, the rest have been forced to find accommodation with friends and relatives.

According to the rehabilitation division of the Jaffna Secretariat, the main administrative centre in the peninsula, 1,400 temporary accommodation sheds will be erected at Valikamam and Vadamaradchchi. Other refugees have been forced to move to Wannai, on the mainland of the Northern Province, despite bitter experiences there when the PA government's security forces captured the peninsula and displaced thousands of people in 1995-96.

Food and other basic requirements provided by international non-governmental organisations (NGO) are only distributed to those refugees sheltering at the camps. The Joint Committee of the NGOs, which has

lodged a complaint with the Government Agent of Jaffna, has said that only 10 percent of displaced families have found shelter at the camps, which means that 90 percent of the refugees receive no rations.

Jaffna district health officers have warned that overcrowded conditions at the camps could see the rapid spread of measles, chicken pox, diarrhea and other infectious diseases. According to the deputy director of Jaffna's health services, the lack of adequate toilets and other basic facilities could see major epidemics. "We don't have adequate health officers," he said. "We require 12 medical officers but at the moment there are only two on duty. The lack of refrigerators prevents us from preserving needy medical drugs and although there are generators, we don't have fuel."

Jaffna peninsula has not received any malathion (a chemical used to destroy mosquitoes) this year, despite numerous requests to Colombo by the Jaffna Health Department. As a result, malaria is expected to increase dramatically in September and October.

A recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund revealed that while every child in Sri Lanka had been affected by the war, 900,000 children in the North and East of Sri Lanka lacked education, food and shelter or had been directly injured.

Since April 22, when the LTTE captured the Elephant Pass army camp, schools to the south of Jaffna have closed and others in the Jaffna municipality such as St. Patrick College, Jaffna Holy Family Convent, Chundikuli Ladies College, St. Johns College, St. Anthony Ladies College and St. Joseph Vidyalayam have stopped functioning.

About 9,000 students due to sit for government advance level examinations on July 31 have been affected. Jaffna University has also shut down and students from Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Valachchenai and other towns in the eastern province have been transported back home.

We interviewed several people at one refugee camp. Most had fled their homes several times during the war. One man, a tailor, said: "The clashes in Ariyalai between the LTTE and PA forces started on May 9. We could not sleep that night and left Ariyalai the following morning. I could not even clear my sewing machine and other goods when I left and now we cannot work or return to our village. I have visited

more than 15 tailoring shops searching for work but all refused to employ me. How are we going to live?"

A Jaffna central college student at the camp explained: "I am from Ariyalai studying for the advance level examination. We have had no education since last May and all my notes are at home. I have no school uniform and have to attend school in an old dress. It seems we will only be able to study when this war comes to an end."

Another refugee said: "I am a fisherman and the father of eight children. On May 15, LTTE shells exploded at Gurunagar killing several people, including six people that I knew, so we fled the area. We cannot live with the meagre relief provided by the government. The monthly supplies provided by the government are not even adequate for 15 days."

Continuous purchases of new military hardware from Israel, China, Pakistan, the Czech Republic, Russia and India by the PA government and predictions of new outbreaks of fighting by the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE means that the plight of the Tamil masses on the peninsula will only worsen.



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