

Growing hostility to the government and the LTTE

A first hand report from LTTE-controlled territory in Sri Lanka

A correspondent
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The following is an eyewitness report sent to the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka from the Vanni—an area in the north of the island under the control of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The story provides a graphic account of the impact of the Sri Lankan government's devastating 18-year war to suppress the democratic rights of the Tamil minority and the hardships caused by its continuing economic blockade and the lack of basic goods and services. At the same time, the report points to a growing disillusion with the LTTE—its extortionate taxes, its lack of concern for the plight of ordinary workers, farmers and young people and its anti-democratic methods.

The normal life of people has been completely shattered in the Vanni area to a greater extent than in other parts of northern and eastern provinces due to the war waged by the Colombo regime. People here live in suspense; one could say they live a temporary life. There are no permanent shelters, no proper meals, no education for children and everyone has to always be ready to run for cover to escape the attacks of the Sri Lankan military.

People are suffering as a result of this destructive 18-year war, brutally continued since 1995 by President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance (PA) government. Here in the Vanni, hundreds of thousands of people live as refugees. Among them you find refugees who fled from the Jaffna peninsula. Others in the area lost their property and other belongings when the military extended its operations to Vanni.

The shelters are huts, 2 metres by 2 metres, either thatched with coconut leaves or covered with polythene sheets. In the Vanni—which includes the Vavuniya, Kilinochchi, Mannar and Mulaithivu districts—you can see the remains of old houses and other buildings destroyed by the war. Only a portion of the Vanni—along the southern border of the Vavuniya and Mannar districts—is under government control while the rest is held by the LTTE.

There are no factories and very few jobs. Two government administrators known as Government Agents (GA) or District Secretaries (DS) operate from Kilinochchi and Mulaithivu. The government still pays the staff in the few schools and hospitals. One bank branch functions in Kilinochchi to pay salaries and carry out other transactions. The chief administrator and other government employees all work under the supervision of the LTTE and its own self-styled Government Agent. Other than these jobs, people have to survive as farmers, agricultural labourers or traders.

Small scale cultivation, the main livelihood for people in the area, is continuously disrupted. Those who can farm are forced to do so using

primitive methods. To prepare the paddy fields for cultivation they only have buffaloes. Agro-chemicals, fertilisers and agricultural machinery are all among the long list of goods that the PA government bans from LTTE-controlled areas. A farmer can buy a 50 kilogram bag of ammonia but for 1,200 rupees—it is 800 rupees at Vavuniya and 650 rupees in Colombo.

A 52-year-old farmer from Kilinochchi told us: “The government in the south has banned everything we want for cultivation. But from the LTTE-controlled stores you can buy things at high prices. You can buy a 50-kilo bag of urea fertiliser—an item banned by the government—at 2,500 rupees. The normal price in Colombo is 350 rupees. How can we carry on?”

“During the last season, farmers who were able to cultivate paddy rice faced the problem of selling it. The Defence Ministry does not allow us to transport paddy rice to the north. Ultimately we had to sell our produce to the LTTE-run stores at a lower price. We could not even get enough money to cover our costs.”

Although the government officers obtained permission from the Defence Ministry to transport agricultural produce to Vavuniya, farmers could not afford the transport costs. Transport is under the control of the LTTE and they charge 300 rupees for a 70-kilogram bag. The LTTE also charges one such bag as tax from each farmer who cultivates an acre.

The war has also devastated the fishing community. The security forces have banned deep-sea fishing. Those who engage in fishing have to survive without proper boats or equipment. Most use rafts. One fisherman from Mulaithivu told us: “We can't go out to sea as it has been prohibited by the Defence Ministry. When we return from after fishing near the seashore, the LTTE men are there to collect tax. They charge us 10 rupees per kilo of fish and then they charge 10 rupees per kilo from the traders who buy our fish.”

“Some of us have to ride bicycles 40 kilometres to reach Kilinochchi town to sell our fish. Some days we can't sell a kilo at 3 rupees,” a fisherman from Nachchikuda said. A number of small children, who have been forced to drop out of school because of the war, are involved in fishing.

The situation for people who fled from Jaffna is worse. They are completely dependent on the meagre rations provided by the Colombo government. These refugees are always underfed but sometimes when the rations are withheld for months they are pushed to the point of complete starvation. Other refugees from the Vanni who have lost their homes and livelihood receive nothing.

There are about 50,000 refugees in Kilinochchi alone and about

400,000 throughout the Vanni. The twice-monthly ration for one person is just 368 rupees (about \$US4) which is not enough even to cover the bare necessities for three days. By comparison, the monthly wage for an ordinary worker in Colombo is about 4,000 rupees. "Even from that amount, the LTTE gives us only 168 rupees. They don't care about us. We live under trees. But LTTE does not bother about us," a mother of two told us.

Though certain goods are banned by the Colombo regime you can find them in LTTE-run shops at higher prices. We went to a store at Tharmapuram. A 13-rupee piece of soap cost 20 rupees. Milk for children, which is 110 rupees for a 450-gram pack in the south, is around 150 to 200 rupees here. One Panadol (paracetamol) tablet is 15 rupees—12 times higher than the normal price in the south. The trader explained to us that he gets his goods from the LTTE and has to sell at the prices fixed by them.

As part of its government ration, a family sometimes gets five litres of kerosene at 35 rupees per litre. The price in the south is 19 rupees and 40 cents per litre. Out of the ration the LTTE takes four litres and we receive only one. In their stores, they sell a litre of kerosene for 120 rupees.

Only a few children who fled to the Vanni from Jaffna have been able to enrol in school. Moreover, these "schools" have also had to shift as a result of military operations. In some places, you see teachers conducting classes under trees or in temporary huts with the children seated on mats.

After the school in Kilinochchi was destroyed, it was shifted to Akkarayankulam, 14km away. There are two coconut leaf-thatched huts and some classes are conducted out in the open. There are only five teachers for about 700 students. "We did our ordinary level examination last December sitting on mats," students told us. Three or four students have to share a textbook as the government does not provide enough books.

The main hospital is situated at Kilinochchi but there are no facilities to do surgery. One doctor explained: "In this area infectious diseases are prevalent. Because people live in the jungle we see patients suffering from diseases such as malaria and cholera. Although there are up to 100 patients we can only treat 25. Every three months the government is supposed to provide us with medicines but we get them only twice a year and then not in sufficient quantity. Rabies is spreading, but we just don't have the drugs to treat it."

Apart from the Kilinochchi base hospital, there is only one other in the district—42km away at Molahavil. In this so-called hospital based in two huts, we saw only one doctor helped by 14 voluntary nurses serving a large number of patients. At least five doctors are needed but the government has allocated money for only one. "We can't get medicines for our ailments from this hospital but you find essential drugs in pharmacies controlled by the LTTE. But where do you get the money to buy them at these exorbitant prices when a one tablet of paracetamol is 15 rupees?" one woman in the queue told us.

Facing these severe conditions, some people go to Jaffna expecting life will be better but they face repressive military rule there. Others flee to India secretly. If you are caught by the LTTE trying to leave without permission, you get sent to their jails. The separatists do not like people moving out from the Vanni as it calls into question their legitimacy. They also calculate the army is less likely to attack heavily populated areas.

To go from the Vanni to government-controlled Vavuniya, people have to obtain permission from the LTTE. You first have to pay 20 rupees to get a form and then fill it out with personal and family

particulars and the reason for the trip. Weeks later you might get permission but then you have to pay a further 200 rupees and to provide property and a relative as surety that you will return.

It is a two or three day journey to reach the border with army-held territory. At the first army checkpoint at Thampana, 30km from Vavuniya, a visitor can wait for days to obtain the necessary permission to enter. It is rare to get through in hours. To stay at Vavuniya, even for a day, you have to get permission from the Vavuniya police.

There is not much difference between the LTTE's rule in the Vanni and that of the government in army-controlled Vavuniya. The masses in the Vanni hate the PA government of President Kumaratunga and the military. But a new factor is now emerging. People are increasingly disenchanted with the LTTE as well and express their anger against its repressive regime.

No political groups are allowed nor any literature criticising the LTTE. Several members of the Socialist Equality Party in Kilinochchi were arbitrarily detained by the LTTE in 1998 and only released after a concerted international campaign. Since then the SEP's Tamil-language newspaper *Tholilalar Pathai* has been banned from the Kilinochchi library.

These days young people show no interest in joining the LTTE. One teacher from Mulaithivu told us: "LTTE cadres come to the school, lecture students about the importance of [a separate Tamil] Eelam state and demand they join the movement. They don't ask permission from us. If we opposed them we would be accused of being traitors. But the students show no enthusiasm. So the LTTE scolds them: 'What are you going to do with your schooling. The Sinhalese are destroying our homeland.' The LTTE also threatens to take students forcibly."

When students return home from school, the LTTE pressures them to join up. They are campaigning among children between the ages of 12 and 14. Some parents told us that they fear opposing the LTTE because they would lose their subsidies. They also complained that the LTTE prevents them from seeing their sons and daughters.

The LTTE asks village officers to help. But as one officer told us: "They ask us to go house to house recruiting. How can we do that? People would beat us." As boys do not respond and move from place to place to avoid recruitment, the LTTE has concentrated on young girls. Because they find difficulty earning a living and face other problems, some girls joined the LTTE.

This is a new situation. There is a widespread disillusionment with the LTTE. Because it collects taxes, sells goods at high prices, does not tolerate dissenting voices and imposes other restrictions, people feel that the LTTE does not represent their interests. The LTTE has now shown that they are willing to talk with the Colombo government. The main factor is pressure from Western countries. But it also indicates that the disaffection of Tamils is also a factor pushing the LTTE to reach a compromise.

People want to be free from this long drawn-out war and to enjoy peace. But many of them do not believe it will come about through the LTTE or the Colombo regime.



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