Poverty and a lack of democratic rights

A first-hand report of life in LTTE-held areas of Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
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In Sri Lanka, the Colombo media is engaged in a campaign to present the ceasefire agreement between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as having led to greater freedom and improved conditions for Tamils in the country's war zones. That is not the case in government-controlled areas where civilians are still subject to army harassment and living standards remain unchanged. Nor, as our correspondents' first-hand report makes clear, has the situation changed greatly in the LTTE-held areas, which have been previously subject to military attack and a debilitating economic blockade.

For 145 kilometres, the main A9 highway linking the northern Sri Lankan town of Jaffna to the southern areas of the island passes through LTTE-controlled areas in the Wanni region and lower Jaffna peninsula before reaching the army-held town of Vavuniya. The road was severed in April-May 2000, when the LTTE seized the key strategic army base at Elephant Pass and initiated an offensive that overran large areas of the Jaffna peninsula before being halted on the outskirts of Jaffna town.

One of the benefits promised by the ceasefire was the opening up of the A9, avoiding the difficulties of travelling by sea or trying to obtain a seat on a military transport. For ordinary people travelling between Jaffna and Vavuniya, considerable difficulties remain.

It is necessary to use five separate buses to travel the 145 km. From Vavuniya, one goes as far as the army checkpoint at Omanthai and walks for 15 minutes across no-man's land to reach the LTTE checkpoint. Then a bus from the other side of Omanthai transports passengers another five kilometres to a major LTTE guard post at Puliyankulam to join the LTTE's Tamil Eelam Transport Service to Muhamalai. Another vehicle takes the passengers to the army barrier at Muhamalai to board a bus to Jaffna.

No public bus operates between Colombo and Jaffna. All these services are run by private companies at extortionate rates. The passengers have to organise themselves as groups to hire private buses or vans and pay 1,000 rupees ($US10) each for a one-way journey. The fare is equivalent to a week's wage for an average worker.

Along the A9 in the LTTE-held Wanni, one sees demolished buildings, houses, shops, and temples—all testimony to the devastation wrought by the 19-year civil war. Notice boards erected by some non-government organisations (NGOs) warn: "Beware of land mines." The highway has become a gravel road that zigzags to avoid the big holes left by mine explosions.

Off the road, people live in poverty in wattle-and-daub houses with thatched roofs, always ready to shift at the first sign of military clashes. Many have had to flee before, moving from one place to another or staying for days, weeks or months under the trees in the forest.

The area has no proper water supply. A recently-built, 18-metre-high water tower lies in ruins after being bombed by the air force. People now have to walk long distances to fetch water. After the ceasefire, many families have begun to clean up their water wells but in most cases the water tastes salty.

Most of the schools in Wanni have been demolished by air force bombs and artillery attacks. A few are still functioning. Two of the schools in the town of Killinochchi lack basic facilities. There are no windows or doors in the building. Other schools in the area are mud sheds with thatched roofs and no furniture. There are not enough teachers.

Many students have to walk or ride bicycles up to 12 kilometres to go to school. According to recent research conducted by the Rural Economic Research and Development Corporation, an NGO, 25,245 students in five education zones in Wanni are not attending school regularly because of poor education facilities. Out of them, 4,768 students have dropped-out, another 17,264 attend irregularly and 3,213 students are not attending at all.

Years of war and economic sanctions have resulted in widespread health problems. Under the ceasefire, a number of families who had fled to the Wanni from the east to escape air force bombing, are now returning. Research conducted by the Sri Lankan Red Cross revealed that 68 percent of children whose parents have resettled to the eastern town of Trincomalee suffer from malnutrition or being underweight and a number of diseases, including malaria.

Up to 3,000 people have been treated for malaria in the past two months in Killinochchi. Provincial health authorities have warned about a fresh outbreak of malaria in the same region. Poverty, lack of medicines and inadequate health services are the main reasons. Most people live in mud huts with grass roofs and little or no protection against mosquitoes. Under these conditions the children are particularly vulnerable.

Nine hospitals in the Wanni area are closed as a result of the war.

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The remaining few hospitals operate in poorly equipped facilities with severe shortages of trained staff, medicine and even furniture. Doctors only visit twice a week. One doctor has to visit the Mulangavil and Veruvil hospitals. Another covers the three clinics in Veruvil in a single day. The maternity ward at Veruvil has no facilities and no doctor. Patients with serious conditions have to be transferred to Akkarayan hospital, 30 km away, but there are no vehicles available for emergency situations.

The crisis in the health services in the Wanni has been further complicated by the LTTE's actions. The group takes a significant portion of the medicine and medical equipment sent for government-run hospitals for its own needs. The only qualified doctor attached to the Akkarayan government hospital is working in a private hospital run by the LTTE. Ordinary people cannot afford treatment there.

Members of the LTTE's "medical section" now run the Akkarayan government hospital but they have no proper medical training. In one case, the LTTE's staff used Ayurvedic (native medicine) techniques on a young man with a broken leg. When he was later transferred to the Vavuniya government hospital at his parents' request, the doctors found that his bones had knitted in the wrong way and could not be corrected. A patient with a stomach pain was treated with ulcer tablets but died after being transferred to the Vavuniya hospital. The LTTE refused to issue a pass for his wife to visit him before his death.

The LTTE bans contraception in areas under its control. Only women over 35 years and having five children or more are permitted access to surgical methods of preventing conception.

Although the government has partially lifted economic sanctions on LTTE-controlled areas, the prices of essential goods are still very high in comparison to Colombo. The LTTE levies taxes that impose considerable hardships on ordinary working people.

Usually a 25 percent tax has to be paid for each lorry load of cargo entering an LTTE-controlled area. As a result, the cost of goods worth 100,000 rupees immediately jumps to 125,000 rupees. In addition, the small storeowners, who buy from big traders, have to pay another tax on goods purchased. If any item is not listed, the LTTE imposes heavy fines.

These measures have combined to push up prices. A kilogram of sugar is 50 rupees, a kilogram of flour is 27 rupees, one Panadol tablet is 2.50 rupees and a litre of kerosene is 40 rupees—more than 50 percent higher than Colombo prices. Co-operative shops are supposed to sell kerosene for 18 rupees per litre, but usually they have none. A bag of cement costs 900 rupees compared to just 350 rupees in the south of the island.

Although the prices in co-operative shops are comparable with Colombo, most of the foodstuffs are spoiled. The LTTE takes the fresh items and returns spoiled stock from its own warehouses—all of which is organised by LTTE supporters appointed to administer the co-operatives. The fresh food is then sold in LTTE-run shops at prices that most people cannot afford.

One old farmer commented bitterly: "Where have the economic sanctions been lifted? Blocking the transport of goods, raising the prices of items coming from the south through taxes and stockpiling them are also economic sanctions. Sanctions or not, we are facing the same situation."

Many people living in the Wanni are refugees who are meant to receive dry rations from the government. For a month, the value of the food allocated used to be 630 rupees for a five-member family and 168 rupees for one person. But this was enough for only two days. To make matters worse, the LTTE cut these meagre allowances to 540 rupees for a five-member family and 135 rupees for a single person.

In the Wanni, people mainly depend on agriculture and fishing. The few other workplaces were destroyed during the war. The LTTE imposes taxes in these areas as well. High prices are charged for manure, pesticides and other items needed by farmers.

The LTTE has fixed the price for a 50-kg bag of paddy rice at 1,050 rupees and deducts a 150-rupee tax per bag from the farmers. Most farmers are sinking further into debt. Many paddy fields have not been cultivated for a long time and have become bare land. Some are filled with land mines. Thousands of buffaloes, previously used to pull the ploughs, have been abandoned.

For fishermen to go to sea, they have to obtain passes from the LTTE's Sea Tigers. The passes involve paying four or five different taxes and levies. Many fishermen who lack boats, nets and other equipment are forced to try to eke out a living by diving for crabs and beach demurs [a seafood delicacy]. Even then, the LTTE pockets a big share of the proceeds.

One fisherman complained: "We had to dive from morning to evening to find one or two beach demurs. Some days we find nothing. The LTTE has fixed a price of 150 rupees for a demur worth 300 rupees. In the Wishvamadu area, the LTTE buys a kilo of prawns for 80 rupees and sells them for 300-500 rupees at the Mannar fish stalls."

The LTTE retains tight control over any movement in and out of areas under its control. To leave the Wanni, anyone between 26 and 45 years of age has to pay 200 rupees. Those under 26 have to pay 300 rupees. In one case, a member of the rival Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Front left the area in 1997 and went to Velanai on the Jaffna peninsula without permission. He was arrested when he returned recently after the signing of the ceasefire.

As far as basic democratic rights are concerned, nothing has changed. The LTTE is the only organisation allowed to carry out political work. All the other Tamil parties have effectively agreed to this ban by accepting the LTTE's claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people. Public meetings and the distribution of political literature by other organisations are effectively banned.

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