

Northern Sri Lanka: the struggle for survival amid the ruins of war

M. Aravinthan
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The following article is a first-hand account of the social conditions in the war-ravaged northern areas of Sri Lanka. A ceasefire agreement was signed in February between the United National Front (UNF) government in Colombo and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While the deal was trumpeted in the media as opening up a new era of peace and better living standards, the material conditions facing masses of ordinary working people on the Jaffna peninsula have not substantially improved.

The highway from Colombo to Jaffna, known as the A9, passes through Vavuniya, the southernmost town of Sri Lanka's Northern Province. Travelling another 15km takes you into Omanthai, followed by the LTTE-controlled part of Vanni and small towns like Puliyanakulam, Mankulam, Kilinochchi and Paranthan. Then the A9 reaches Elephant Pass, the gateway to the Jaffna peninsula, Palai and finally the army-controlled Muhamalai. Jaffna town—the main city in northern Sri Lanka—is another 30km away.

The total distance from Omanthai to Muhamalai is less than 100km (60 miles), but it takes six hours or more to complete the journey by bus. Buses pass through four checkpoints, two manned by the Sri Lankan army and two by the LTTE. At each stop there are lengthy delays as passengers disembark while they and their belongings are checked. LTTE officials charge taxes on anyone carrying valuables.

The LTTE-controlled Vanni is the most difficult part of the journey. The road has recently been patched up after the ceasefire, with numerous potholes filled with soil and sand. On both sides of the road, you frequently find yellow strips tied to poles or trees, with signs saying "Beware of mines".

For the 60km from Omanthai to Kilinochchi, there is no sign of life because there are no facilities even for re-settlement. Kilinochchi was once a major city in the Vanni, bristling with crowds, but its public market, government buildings, schools, temples, churches, shops, libraries and many houses have been destroyed. Most of the damage was done by the Sri Lankan military through air raids and artillery barrages.

North of Elephant Pass, from Mirusuvil to Ariyalai including Chavakachcheri and Kaithadi, most of the housing and public buildings have been destroyed. The area was devastated in savage fighting in 2000 when the LTTE captured the strategic Elephant Pass army base then rapidly pressed north, threatening to take Jaffna town. In the fierce counterattack, the Sri Lanka security forces reduced much of the area to rubble with air attacks and multi-barrel cannons. In Chavakachcheri, two well-known schools—the Driehberg and Hindu Colleges—were destroyed along with the public market, the railway station and other buildings.

A woman who was forced out of Chavakachcheri area explained: "My husband worked as a labourer in a school. Our house in the Mattuvil South village has been destroyed. We engaged in poultry farming to supplement my husband's income. Now we are living at Nallur in Jaffna in a small house with four families. I have two school-age daughters. My husband is working at another school—temporarily. His [monthly] income is enough only for 10 days. Yes, the peace talks have given us temporary

relief, but I do not think there is any chance for us to improve our conditions."

K. Thevarajah told us: "After the ceasefire we came back from the [LTTE-held] Vanni to resettle at our house in Ariyalai. But the Sri Lankan armed forces would not allow us to go there. My house is destroyed and there are still land mines in the area. A man I knew was killed by a land mine explosion. I am living in a relative's house. In 1995, when the army was about to take Jaffna, the LTTE ordered us all to leave for the Vanni. We left without taking anything to Puthukudiyirippu in Vanni and faced immense difficulties. Thousands of people had to live under trees and along the roads."

A female schoolteacher explained that she and her family had been among hundreds of thousands of people who were ordered by the LTTE to leave for the Vanni on the night of October 31, 1995. Amid the throng of refugees, her daughter slipped into the Navatkuli lagoon and narrowly escaped death. Fellow refugees rushed to rescue her.

"We are suffering a lot, because of the war," she said. "Will the ceasefire stay or, as in the past, is it only temporary? The Jaffna economy is destroyed. Many families depend on the foreign remittances from their sons and daughters who fled the country to avoid the horror of war. There's no opportunity for employment now."

Thousands of refugees, driven from their homes in the course of the war, are now attempting to return. Since the ceasefire, more than 500 families have returned from the Vanni to Kayts and Karainagar islands near Jaffna. They have been forced to erect temporary huts or to live in crowded conditions with family or friends. About a thousand families from villages such as Shanthipuram and Thoppukadu on Karainagar and Paruthiyadaippu on Kayts were forced to leave during the 1990s. Many are unable to return because their villages were taken over and converted into naval bases.

New navy camps have been set up since the ceasefire agreement around the main base on Karainagar. These include a patch of land known as Thalavolai and Palavodai on Karainagar that has been surrounded by a barbed wire fence, as well as a site used by Samurdi [welfare] officers and a former Eelam Peoples Democratic Party camp on Kayts.

Because of the naval bases, local fishermen are not permitted to fish at night. The whole area, including Kayts, Karainagar, Mandathivu and Delft, has been declared a high security zone. The locals are poor farmers, fishermen and manual workers. Their life is very harsh, as there are no proper food or medical facilities. They have to walk long distances even to get drinking water.

One fisherman told us: "The harassment of fishermen has been continuing even since the ceasefire agreement. The navy captured 13 boats and arrested 75 fishermen, including myself, at Karainagar Bay in Kayts sea area on August 7. The navy tried to hand us over to the Kayts police, but were forced to release us due to a protest by people in the area."

Another fisherman, Alexander, said fishermen had gone to an area to

catch beach demurs (an expensive seafood delicacy) under the impression that the navy would not harass them. “But nothing has changed and our lives are always in danger,” he said.

There were only ever a few factories in the Jaffna area. But most of them have been destroyed by the war and the remaining factories do not have power to operate. The biggest factory on the Jaffna peninsula—Kankesanthurai (KKS) Cement—is not permitted to operate because the area has been declared a high security zone.

A KKS worker living in Jaffna told the WSWs: “More than 7,000 families from Palaly, Myiliddy, Keerimalai, Thaiyiddy and Maviddapuram as well as the KKS area (generally known as Valligamam North) were displaced by 1990. Most of these people are now living in refugee camps in Inuvil, Kantharodai, Maruthana Madam or with friends. We are not allowed to resettle because our villages and towns have been declared a high security zone.”

The main Sri Lankan army base on the Jaffna peninsula is situated at Palaly, in the middle of this area. All of the houses situated from Vasavilan to Palaly have been bulldozed to expand the base. Defence Secretary Austin Fernando told a meeting at the Tellippalai regional office last month that no one would be able to resettle at Valligamam North because of security.

Much of the agricultural land on the Jaffna peninsula has been left uncultivated due to the widespread planting of mines. Most of the fertile land in Jaffna districts, such as Urumpurai, Vasavilan and Tellippalai, has returned to forest due to the war. As a result, more than 75 percent of people on the peninsula are unemployed.

The situation facing students is equally severe. The secretary of the Jaffna University Employees Union, Thavarajah, told us: “Jaffna university has very few computers. The unemployment rate in Jaffna district is very high. About 90 percent of students who leave the university are unemployed as well. Only medical students can get jobs.”

According to one university student: “Earlier, there was some chance of getting a job in the US or Europe. But that opportunity also has come to a complete halt now.”

Housing is a huge problem in Jaffna as most of the houses have been destroyed and many areas are full of mine fields. Government minister T. Maheswaran has admitted that the Sri Lankan army occupies about 1,500 houses in the district. As a consequence, the Tamil newspaper *Thinakural* reported, 40 percent of Jaffna district is off limits for resettlement—for security reasons.

The roads and railways in the district are almost totally destroyed. About 160km of railway line from Thandikulam, near Vavuniya, to Kankesanthurai has disappeared—both the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE have used the track and sleepers to build bunkers. The highways have not been systematically maintained for more than two decades and are full of potholes. There are some private and public buses but you have to wait hours to catch one. They are in bad condition and break down frequently. Students ride bikes long distances to go to school. The charge for a three-wheeler taxi for a five kilometre trip is around 150 rupees (\$US1.50)—more than a day’s wage for a worker.

Several schools are still occupied by the army and others are located inside large army bases. Velanai Madya Maha Vidyalayam in Kayts operates inside a 25-acre navy base. Every day, students have to register their names at a particular sentry point. Pont Pedro’s Hartley College, north of Jaffna, is near an army complex and teachers and students have to go through an army checkpoint. Karainagar Thoppukadu Sampan is shut because it is sited in a high security zone. Air force bombing destroyed Velanai Iynar Vidyalayam.

A KKS cement factory worker explained: “More than 25 schools have been closed in this area [north of Jaffna]. The KKS Nadeswara College is still occupied by the army. The Tellippalai Union College was vacated [by the army] last month but it has been declared ‘out-of-bounds’ for parents.

The Tellippalai hospital has been shifted. Even with the ceasefire agreement we are suffering a lot.”

Most of the hospitals on the Jaffna peninsula face severe shortages of doctors, medical staff and medicine. The out-patient queue at the Jaffna General Hospital is up to 500-long every day. Patients have died due to the lack of appropriate drugs.

Several nurses told the WSWs: “It is with difficulty that we save patients’ lives because of the shortage of doctors and drugs. The hospital freezer (for operating purposes) was donated by the British government in 1995, but only arrived here in 2002. Now there are no technicians to fix it. We are not able to properly transport patients to Colombo or other places for treatment.”

The only facility for treating tuberculosis (TB), the Myiliddy hospital, is closed because the area is part of a high security zone. The government hospital at Kayts has 48 beds, a retired 80-year-old part-time doctor and three nurses. Patients are generally transported to Jaffna hospital, which is 20km away. But there is only one ambulance available to cover Kayts as well as other areas, including Punguduthivu, Nainathivu and Velanai.

A Velanai hospital worker, Loganayahi, described the difficulties. “We can only treat minor diseases like a fever, or a cough in our hospital. For a patient with an injury, a bandage has to be brought from elsewhere. Only one doctor works in the hospital on Tuesdays and Fridays. He has to go to the Punguduthivu hospital on the other days of the week. There are no transport or communication facilities. A pregnant woman died last year because we had no transport.”

The difficulties facing ordinary working people have been compounded by the actions of the government and the LTTE. Following the ceasefire, the LTTE began setting up offices throughout the Jaffna area and using its control of the A9 highway to impose taxes and levies.

Every item entering Jaffna is subject to an LTTE tax of 25 percent and sometimes more. For instance, a three-wheeler taxi purchased in Colombo for about 150,000 rupees is taxed 65,000 rupees. For every apple, a one-rupee tax is imposed. A swimming shoe—a fishing device used to catch beach demurs—costs 2,500 rupees and is taxed 250 rupees.

The LTTE has also tried to corner the trade in various items. Farmers have to pay taxes to export crops such as chilies, bananas, tobacco, onions, etc. Fishermen who catch prawns for export are supposed to sell their produce to the LTTE for 700 rupees per kilogram. The same prawns are then sold in Colombo for 1,650 rupees.

A farmer from the LTTE-controlled Vanni told us: “The LTTE taxes farmers heavily. High prices are charged for manure, pesticides and other items needed by farmers. Compared to the prices in Colombo, the prices here are three times higher. Farmers cannot afford these higher costs and consequently many paddy fields have not been cultivated for lengthy periods and have become barren lands.

“My one daughter joined the LTTE and she was killed during a battle with the Sri Lankan armed forces. My son is also with the LTTE and the LTTE has named our family as a heroes’ family! The LTTE still asked me to pay tax and I refused.”

His comments reflect the general suspicion, disgust and hostility felt among Tamils in the north of Sri Lanka toward all parties—those in Colombo that prosecuted the brutal war for nearly two decades against the Tamil minority population, and the LTTE, which has imposed its own arbitrary rule and ruthlessly suppressed basic democratic rights.



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