

Sri Lanka: displaced Jaffna refugees want military zones dismantled

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Fifteen months have now passed since the ceasefire agreement, or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), struck between the Sri Lankan government and Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in order to discuss a political settlement to end nearly 20 years of civil war.

But there are few signs of change on the Jaffna peninsula, at the island's northern tip. It remains an occupied territory of the Sri Lankan military. While the government and the LTTE conduct their protracted negotiations, an estimated 130,000 people are still living in over-crowded conditions in refugee camps or with relatives or friends, having been driven from their homes by the Sri Lankan security forces to establish militarised high security zones (HSZs).

There are no longer army, navy, air force and police checkpoints throughout the north, but large groups of soldiers are seen everywhere, travelling in trucks and jeeps, patrolling the streets with weapons in hand, and shopping for their daily needs.

Visitors to Karainagar, a small island that houses the main navy complex, 25 kilometres from Jaffna town, must alight from their vehicles at the island's entry point. Soldiers at the checkpoint demand to see government-issued identity cards and conduct body searches. Along the way and within the island there are demolished and abandoned houses.

Strict military control also continues at Keerimalai, 20 km from Jaffna. Once a famous tourist resort, it is now a major army camp. The military has occupied all the abandoned houses around the base, turning the area into a vast army village. Visitors face stringent security measures. At the checkpoint, soldiers demand identity cards and then sit in the front seat of each vehicle until it reaches its destination. A soldier watches while people do their sightseeing and accompanies them back to the checkpoint.

These are just two of the places that have been designated as HSZs. According to the army, the zones were created during the war to keep military complexes out of the LTTE's firing range. On the Jaffna peninsula alone, there remain 15 HSZs, covering 160 square km, or 18 percent of the total land mass.

Most of the people in Valikamam North area—including Palaly, Kankesanthurai, Myliddy, Tellippalai and Keerimalai—are still displaced. Out of 25,000 houses in Valikamam North, 18,000 are within a HSZ.

Some 10,332 displaced families from this area are living in Jaffna district. Of this number, 8,552 families are living with friends and relatives, while 1,780 families are in refugee camps. Others have gone to the LTTE-controlled Vanni area in the northern mainland.

Our reporters visited refugee camps at Mallakam, Allaveddy, Chankanai and Manipay, where people explained their immense

suffering and their revulsion that their situation had not been solved.

Fifty-year-old S. Masilamany is a father of five children. He is living in Thumpu Tholitsalai refugee camp at Mallakam. Eighteen families in the camp were displaced from Thaiyiddy and Valluvapuram in June 1990 when the Sri Lankan army attacked. Major war operations in 1995 forced them to move to Vanni, where they lived for seven years under immense difficulties.

"We settled at Alampil, in the Mullaithivu district, a forest area. Our children continuously suffered from malaria. Since the ceasefire last year we have been here, as we thought we could have go back to our house. See what has happened to us! It is now 13 years since we were chased out.

"We are doing manual work to earn meagre sums of 100 or 150 rupees [\$US1-1.50] a day. We don't get regular work. Our monthly subsistence [refugee allowance] was cut by half after the ceasefire. Earlier, we received 1,260 rupees a month in two installments, now it is 630 rupees. We have a water problem, and there are no proper toilet facilities—only two toilets for 18 families."

Naagaswary Devasagayam, a mother of seven, added: "Our children's education has been disrupted. How can our children continue their study, when we are moving from place to place?"

There were 46 schools in Valikamam North. Of the 29 schools within the HSZ, 16 have closed, and 13 are functioning outside the zone. Nadeswara College, the biggest school at Kankesanthurai, has been shifted to small houses at Kantharodai, Chunnakam. There were 1,049 students before displacement, but now only 75 attend. According to parents the administration is now trying to close that school because of poor student attendance.

Out of the five hospitals in the area, two are now closed. The main hospital in Tellipalai has been shifted to the co-operative hospital building at Tellipalai. The chest hospital at Myliddy and the cancer hospital at Varuthalaivillan have been shut down.

Tellipalai hospital administrative officer K. Balasundaram explained that the hospital was shifted because of the HSZ. It was also partly damaged by army attacks. "With this small building, we can't function properly. Earlier our hospital had 290 beds, a district medical officer (DMO), 14 medical officers, two dental surgeons and 62 nurses. Now we have only 102 beds. The DMO is the only medical officer. There are two less-qualified registered medical officers (RMOs), two retired RMOs and 13 nurses," he said.

"Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) parliamentarian, Mavai Senathirajah, visited the hospital. We told him the shortcomings of the hospital. He wrote a letter to the health minister, that's all. Due to the lack of facilities, we have to transport some patients to Jaffna hospital, which is over-crowded".

In May, a dental surgeon was appointed to the hospital but there is not even a dental chair for him to treat patients. The health department has refused to provide a chair because the hospital is in a temporary building. There is also a shortage of medicines.

Rajeswary, a 41-year-old mother from Myliddy, wanted to relate her story. Three families, including hers, were displaced in 1990 and lived in Vanni. They returned to Jaffna after the ceasefire and built a hut on private land near the damaged court building in Jaffna.

“We suffered immense hardships in Vanni. Once we just escaped an air strike but many died in front of us. Due to the lack of medical facilities I lost six infants, even before their birth. Four months ago I had a baby at the Jaffna hospital. Recently, Jaffna police arrested me with my four-month-old child because we built our hut on private land. The police kept us from morning to evening. They didn’t care about my crying child.”

She expressed bitterness toward the entire political establishment, including the LTTE. “Many political parties, including the LTTE, came to see us, but no solution is in sight.”

Some 254 people are living in small huts in Kuruvalai refugee camp at Alaveddy, 15 km from Jaffna town. They were originally displaced from Maviddapuram, Kankesanthurai, Tellippalai and Myliddy. After 1990 they shifted to other places and came to the Kuruvalai camp after the ceasefire.

Satkunadevi, a 45-year-old mother of five children, told us: “We don’t have good drinking water. There is only one well, and you can’t drink because of the bad smell. We are going to far away places to bring good water. If it is raining, this place gets inundated.” Their allowances have also been halved since the ceasefire. Despite working on agricultural plots from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day, they earn only 75 rupees a day.

P. Parameswaran, a young person living in the camp, criticised the political parties: “We don’t join any of the political parties, because they only come here for elections. During the election campaign these people said the first thing they would do after their victory would be to solve the refugee problem. After the election, nobody bothered about us. We agree with you that the working people have to build their own party.

“We are living in a private land. Last week, the landowner came and told us to leave or he would go to the courts to evict us. Our lands are occupied by the army in HSZs, so where we can go?”

Much of the land of Valikamam North is fertile for cultivation and most people were farmers. Because of the HSZs, farmers had to abandon 320 hectares of paddy fields, 1,007 hectares used for subsidiary crops, 196 hectares of palmyra trees and 20 hectares of coconut palms. Now they are unemployed.

The largest factory on the Jaffna peninsula was the Kankesanthurai cement factory in Valikamam North. It also came within the HSZ and was shut down, along with the Maviddapuram and Ampanai aluminium plants, the Maviddapuram bucket factory, and the Vayavilan fruit juice plant, leaving thousands of workers jobless.

In Thenmarachi, south of the Jaffna peninsula, HSZs cover Kaithadi, a part of Navatkuli, Maruvampula, Thanankilappu, Karampakam and Eluthumadduval. At Chavakacheri, agricultural lands totaling 2,500 hectares are under military control and 600 hectares are within HSZs. Another 300 hectares cannot be used because of buried land mines. About 1,000 hectares at Kaithadi was released for cultivation but 300 hectares also cannot be used due to land mines.

On the northern peninsula islands of Kayts, Karainagar, Annalaithivu and Eluvaitivu, about 960 families are affected by

HSZs.

The continuation of the HSZs reveals the indifference of both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to the plight of ordinary people. The dismantling of the zones was agreed in last February’s ceasefire, but the military has refused to do so, instead using the issue as a lever to demand that the LTTE disarm first.

Faced with growing resentment and several protests by refugees and their supporters, the LTTE accused the Colombo government of failing to honour the ceasefire agreement.

In order to postpone the issue and avoid a breakdown in the peace talks, the government commissioned an Indian military general, Sathis Nambiar, to study and report on the HSZs. To the dismay and anger of Tamil refugees, the LTTE agreed to wait for Nambiar’s report.

When Nambiar handed over his report to the government on May 8, he suggested that a few zones could be removed. Some zones could be downsized, but only on one condition: “Any dismantling of the HSZs or forward defences of the SLDF [Sri Lankan Defence Forces] will have to be matched by the similar dismantling of LTTE operational military positions.”

Thus, the Indian general’s proposal was in line with the Indian and US position that the LTTE must be disarmed.

Even though the LTTE rejected Nambiar’s report, it has not made the HSZs a main issue in its current temporary withdrawal from the peace talks. Its only concern is to secure political power through the formation of an interim administration for north and east.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has publicly backed the armed forces chiefs and rejected any dismantling of the HSZs until the LTTE hand over its weapons. This has encouraged the Sinhala chauvinist groups, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which have vehemently opposed any dismantling of the zones.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, while under pressure from business leaders to conclude a deal with the LTTE, has accommodated himself to the military chiefs and chauvinist groups, bowing to their stance on the HSZs.

The attitude of the Colombo regime and the LTTE to the suffering of the Tamil refugees underscores the nature of the political settlement both sides are seeking. It has nothing to do with securing the democratic rights or improving the living conditions of the masses who have endured 19 years of war.



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