

Thousands of Tamils flee from government-controlled areas in Sri Lanka

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As the danger of open civil war in Sri Lanka intensifies, thousands of Tamils in the North and East of the island have fled their homes to areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Several dozen people have also left for the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The exodus comes after two months of steadily escalating violence. At least 150 military personnel, LTTE members and civilians have died since the election of President Mahinda Rajapakse. The armed forces have stepped up the harassment and intimidation of Tamils through increased patrols, checkpoints and arbitrary cordon and search operations.

According to WSWs correspondents in Jaffna, about 3,000 families had left the Jaffna peninsula by the end of last week for the LTTE-controlled Vanni. Over the past weeks, hundreds of families have travelled through Muhamalai, south of Jaffna town—the entry point to the Vanni.

More families have shifted from the villages of Ariyalai, Velanai, Punguduthivu, Kayts, Thambatti, Kodikamam, Varani, Karainagar and Velvettithurai. They could be seen on the road with their belongings packed into trucks, minibuses and auto rickshaws. According to the LTTE-sponsored Kilinochchi Development, Relief and Rehabilitation Organisation (KDRRO), families entering the district have been sent to community centres or are staying with their relatives.

Some families have left coastal areas because of restrictions imposed on fishing by the Sri Lankan military. But most are “maaveerar” (great hero) families—the LTTE term for families whose sons or daughters have been killed in fighting. They fear they will be the targets of the military or associated paramilitary groups as the violence escalates.

Last Sunday night unidentified gunmen killed three women—a mother and her two daughters—at Manipai, 10 kilometres from Jaffna. The father and son were injured

and are under treatment in the Jaffna hospital. One of the women killed, 30-year-old Bojan Renuka, had acted in an LTTE propaganda film—*Amma* (Mother). The pro-LTTE Tamilnet blamed thugs from the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which works closely with the military.

A mother leaving for the Vanni told the WSWs that her “maaveerar” family had fled to the Vanni in 1995 and lived at Visvamaru in the Kilinochchi district. She has two sons and two daughters. Her elder son had been a LTTE member. In 1998, because of the difficult conditions in the Vanni, including air attacks, she left for Tamil Nadu in southern India.

In 2004, her family returned to Sri Lanka with the help of the UN refugees commission and settled near Manipai. The Sri Lankan government gave her just 25,000 rupees (\$US250) to assist in resettlement. She was able to get help from a non-government organisation and ran a tea shop to earn a living.

“In the present situation, we can’t stay here. My son and daughters have gone already. We are going to stay with our relations there [in the Vanni]. We are not going there hoping for good facilities but because of the security problem. If we delay any further, the road could be closed. We are leaving our shop. Our children’s education has been affected by all these displacements,” she explained.

Another resident, Sivalingam, had already sent his wife and children to the Vanni. “My daughter-in-law’s family is a hero’s family so we are not safe here. If the war starts, we won’t be able to shift. Here we have our home and possessions. But I decided to leave after watching the situation,” he said.

Tamils from the eastern Trincomalee district have also started to flee to “safer” areas. As of January 11 about 500 families from Mallikaithivu, Kachchanoor and Iruthayapuram had taken refuge in two schools in

Thanganagar—an LTTE-controlled area. About 750 families or 2,371 people from Menkamam, Kumarapuram and Kilivetti had taken shelter in nearby schools or in the homes of relatives after cordon-and-search operations by government forces.

According to the Centre for Security Studies (CSS) website, 48 people have fled over the past week to Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu—the closest point in India to Mannar in northern Sri Lanka. The latest refugees have been sent to the Mandappam area in Tamil Nadu, where refugees who fled Sri Lanka in the 1980s and 1990s are still living in squalid camps.

Mannar bishop Joseph Rayeppu said a number of families had recently sought shelter in local churches fearing reprisals after an attack on a bus killed nine sailors last week. Fishermen and refugees had previously been savagely attacked by naval personnel after a mine explosion at Pesalai in Mannar killed 13 sailors.

A statement by the Jaffna University Teachers Human Rights Organisation, a group hostile to the LTTE, explained: “At 1.30 p.m. on 23rd December a Navy bus transporting naval personnel was attacked by exploding a landmine from the housing scheme in Pesalai, Mannar Island. More than a dozen naval personnel were killed. Following the incident, naval personnel went on a rampage.

“All residents were ordered out about 2.00 p.m. and lined up on the road in the scorching sun and were attacked with gun butts, not sparing the women and children. Men were made to stand with their head in a hole in the ground and were humiliated and kicked from behind. It was only after the intervention of the parish priest that they were allowed to go to the church about 9.00 p.m. The remains of a mother and her four-year-old son have been recovered from a house that was burnt by the Navy. Another parent and child are among those missing.

“Attacks on civilians reportedly continued into the following day. Naval personnel robbed a large quantity of gold from the residents. There was no attempt on the part of the government to intervene promptly and reassure the civilians, let alone acknowledge what happened. Among those admitted to hospital is a 5-year-old boy with a broken skull. A naval man had rammed his gun barrel into the back of the boy’s head and penetrated it.”

The account has not been denied by the security forces or the government. It is just one of a series of incidents that make a mockery of comments by cabinet spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva who told a press conference last

Thursday: “[T]he President has told the armed forces not to provoke the LTTE and abide truly by the Ceasefire Agreement. But they are entitled to act accordingly if for example the LTTE throws a grenade or sets off landmines.”

Both sides—the political establishment in Colombo and the LTTE—are rooted in communal politics, which led to breakdown of talks sponsored by the major powers for a power-sharing arrangement. Unable to address the deepening social crisis facing working people, the government and the LTTE are once again whipping up communal hatred and fears and engaging in what amounts to an undeclared war.

An LTTE-front organisation—Makkal Padai (People’s Army)—issued an appeal on December 29 to Tamil youth to flee to LTTE-controlled areas. “We tried to quench the situation in Jaffna,” its statement declared. “But the Sinhala forces are not ending the attacks, the killing of the innocent and sexual intimidation of women... We all should unite and fight for the liberation of Tamils.” The LTTE-sponsored Tamil National Awakening Organisation has issued a similar statement.

At a press conference in Colombo yesterday, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa made a similar appeal for war. Asked about recent LTTE attacks on the military, Weerawansa declared that the government “must educate those who are still unable to see the true colours of the LTTE to take the decision to defeat the LTTE without displaying cowardice any further in the face of their atrocities.”

The Sinhala chauvinist JVP signed a formal electoral deal with Rajapakse prior to last November’s presidential election to take a more aggressive stance toward the LTTE. Weerawansa was one of Rajapakse’s campaign spokesmen and frequently appeared alongside him in the course of the campaign. It is no accident that less than two months after Rajapakse’s victory, the island is once again plunging headlong to war.



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