

War in Sri Lanka creates a flood of refugees

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Ongoing fighting initiated by the Sri Lankan military against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is creating a social catastrophe. More than 160,000 people have been displaced since the army launched what the Colombo government falsely described as a “limited, humanitarian operation” on July 26 to seize the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory.

The offensive was the pretext for a series of air and artillery attacks on key LTTE positions, provoking counterattacks by the rebels. Over the past week, government positions on the Jaffna peninsula have come under sustained assault by LTTE forces. At least 130 soldiers have been killed in fighting near Jaffna up to Saturday and many more wounded. The military claims to have killed hundreds of LTTE fighters, but there is no independent confirmation.

Tens of thousands of people have fled for safety. The exodus has been compounded by the military’s indiscriminate use of aerial and artillery attacks to drive back LTTE attacks. The northern and eastern war zones of the island have already been ravaged by two decades of war as well as the devastation caused by the December 2004 tsunami. According to official figures, there were already 312,000 internally displaced persons at the beginning of this year.

The violence has been escalating since Mahinda Rajapakse won the country’s presidency last November. For months, the military and associated paramilitary groups have waged a covert war, aimed at undermining the 2002 ceasefire and provoking the LTTE into responding. Amid the worsening conflict, 50,785 people were displaced between April to July and another 7,439 fled to the nearby southern Indian of Tamil Nadu.

Since late July, the numbers have risen dramatically. More than 80,000 people from the eastern province are now huddled in camps at Kantali and Serupura in army-controlled areas and at Vakarai in LTTE-controlled

territory. Around 50,000 of these refugees come from or near the eastern town of Muttur, which was devastated in the fighting on August 2-4.

Officials from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that the agency had problems accommodating all the new refugees. UNHCR spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis said that the number of internally displaced persons had jumped in just three days from 21,000 to 50,000 on August 11. According to the UN agency, some people had to be turned away because of the lack of shelter.

Abdul Mujeeb from the NGO Muslim Foundation for Cultural Development told Al Jazeera on August 9 that people were “walking through the countryside, through the fighting, to get here”. At one camp, there were 20 toilets for 6,000 people. Piles of litter were building up and spilling out into surrounding fields.

In Pearathuweli, the largest camp near Kantale, some 14,000 people are living under tarpaulins, plastic sheeting and any shelter they can find. They are getting water from a muddy stream that runs past the camp. Officials are concerned that refugees, especially children, are becoming ill.

Christian Children’s Fund spokesman Marc Nosbach told the media: “Many children here have acute respiratory illnesses and we’re also seeing the beginning of scabies and diarrhoea.” He said that the camps were very overcrowded and lacking in essential items such as food, medicines and mosquito nets. Among the refugees were at least 4,000 children without their parents.

Abdul Hajeen from Muttur described his experience: “My house has been destroyed, along with many others. We fled to a school, but then even that was hit.” He spent four days walking some 30 kilometres across country to reach the camp at Kantale.

Another Muttur resident Salam said he would not return home. “There is no safety. Who will provide the

Muslims with security? The LTTE did not and neither has the government.” The majority of the Muttur population is Muslim.

The situation confronting refugees in LTTE-controlled areas is worse. An estimated 30,000 Tamil civilians fled to Vakaraï after the air force bombed Ehchilampattu near Mavilaru. Many walked another 60 kilometres to the town of Batticaloa, due to the lack of facilities at Vakaraï.

Conditions in LTTE-held areas are being compounded by a military blockade, including on aid workers. UNHCR spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis said the agency was “now seriously concerned about the welfare of civilians in areas inaccessible to humanitarian agencies because of strictly enforced travel restrictions”. She said that supplies of food and water were at “alarmingly low levels” in many places.

Amid mounting criticisms by aid agencies, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan spoke directly to President Rajapakse on August 16, urging him to allow relief workers into the LTTE areas. Foreign diplomats in Colombo have pressed Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera on the same issue. The government only allowed the International Red Cross (ICRC) to visit LTTE-held areas near Vakaraï last Friday.

In the north, more than 40,000 people have fled their homes on the Jaffna peninsula since fighting erupted there on August 11. Another 15,000 to 20,000 have also been displaced in the LTTE-held Kilinochchi area. According to the UNHCR, about 9,500 people are living outdoors under trees, or in communal buildings.

Seran Selliah, 85, told the pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* website a week ago that thousands were walking towards Kilinochchi to escape the fighting. He said the road was so crowded his son could not ride his bike and had to walk. Thavamanithevi Mahalingam, 56, said that it was the fourth time she had been forced to move as a result of the country’s civil war.

In government-held areas of the Jaffna peninsula, a disaster is also looming. All civilian flights into the northern district were shut down after the LTTE shelled the Palaly airforce base. The road links pass through LTTE-controlled territory and have also been severed. Thousands of people including foreign nationals are stranded in Jaffna town and have joined lengthy waiting lists to leave by sea.

Prices for essential items, such as rice, sugar and

vegetables, have skyrocketed. Fuel, including petrol, diesel and kerosene, is in very short supply. Much of the area has been subject to continuous electricity blackouts. After moving most of their cash to the Palaly base for security, the banks restricted withdrawals to just 1,000 rupees (\$US10) last Friday.

The military has clamped stringent security measures throughout the area. Curfews were in place for all but five hours each day last weekend. Medical services at the Jaffna teaching hospital have been severely curbed because the majority of staff was unable to report for duty. From nearby islands, security forces only allowed one person per family to enter Jaffna peninsula during the lifting of the curfew to obtain essential goods.

Following pleas from aid agencies and government officials in Jaffna, the government finally announced over the weekend that it was sending a ship under International Red Cross escort with 4,000 tonnes of essential items, including food and medicine, to reach Jaffna by Wednesday.



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