

On-the-spot-report

Sri Lankan war threatens humanitarian catastrophe on Jaffna peninsula

Our reporter
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More than half a million people on Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula are facing a humanitarian disaster as the government plunges the country back to war. Hundreds of civilians have been killed during the fighting in the area already, and the entire population is threatened by starvation, and daily abductions and intimidation by pro-government forces.

During early August, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters attacked and captured some areas controlled by the military. They withdrew after two or three days, and the fighting eased. But the conflict resumed on September 8, when the military started attacking LTTE positions at Muhamalai, which is the main entrance to the government-controlled area on the peninsula. LTTE front lines at Nagarkovil, Poonerin and Kilali were also attacked.

The government has deliberately closed the Muhamalai entry point in order to stop food convoys travelling from the south of the island to Jaffna through the LTTE-controlled Wanni area. As a result, people living in the Wanni have also been starved of food and essentials.

In early September, the government sent a ship to Jaffna with food and other basic items, only after human rights organisations, including the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), expressed concern over developing food shortages.

The military's blanket curfews, imposed on the Jaffna peninsula during the August clashes, have been reduced to several hours in the daytime, but the night curfew has continued. Whole-day curfews are suddenly imposed on areas, when the military conducts search operations or when an LTTE attack takes place.

In the limited hours when curfews are lifted, people search for food. However, many are afraid to move

around because they could be targeted by the military. Schools are only open if no curfew is imposed during the morning hours. Even then, parents fear for their children's lives, so few students are attending. Every day, such abductions and "disappearances" are reported, as well as killings near military checkpoints and other places.

Since last December, the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission (HRC) has received 419 complaints of abductions on the Jaffna peninsula. Last month alone, the HRC received 67 abduction complaints. *Uthayan*, a Jaffna-based Tamil daily, reported on September 12 that HRC head Dharmasiri Jayawickrama had given these statistics to the BBC. It is widely believed in Jaffna that the military or allied paramilitaries are responsible.

The situation on the islands around the peninsula is acute because the navy has banned fishing, the main livelihood. Nearly 16,000 fishing families are affected and face continuous harassment by navy personnel.

Anger is running high. In Kayts town, 25 kilometres from Jaffna city, shopkeepers are selling food items to limited numbers of people. Each person can buy one kilo of rice and half a kilo sugar. They do not know when they can next purchase supplies. Desperate to find essentials for daily life, family members go to different shops and try to collect stocks.

Women and men from Ambihainagar travelled to Kayts town, spending 40 rupees on the bus fare, to buy a kilo of rice and a quarter kilo of sugar for 75 rupees. In some cases, they were able to buy two small packets of noodles and biscuits.

Kaladevi, 45, a housewife from Ambihainagar, said: "We have lived without food for two or three days. Some days we have only one meal. Yesterday we got a kilo of flour and made three loaves of bread. I have some left for

tomorrow. Before that, we had only four cups of rice for lunch. We are in this situation because my husband cannot go fishing.”

Parameswary, 50, angrily added: “President Mahinda Rajapakse’s rule is more torturous than Sirimavo’s rule.” This was a reference to Sirimavo Bandaranaike who was prime minister from 1970 to 1977, when people were subject to strict rationing of food and other essentials.

Two women from Eluvaithivu said: “We have to spend 50 rupees for the ferry, 20 rupees for the bus and 70 rupees for tea and other things—all together 140 or 150 rupees—to come here to buy goods. For medical treatment we have to go to Jaffna. Sometimes we have money, but no goods to buy. Sometimes a few items will be available, but we don’t have money. The navy won’t allow fishing in our area. Some people try to fish on the beach but most return without fish.”

People from the islands also travel to Jaffna city, looking for supplies. For villagers from Analaitivu, Eluvaithivu, Nainathivu and Nedunthivu, the bus fares have increased by 10 rupees and the ferry fares by 5 rupees. These increases, driven by fuel shortages and high fuel prices, are a huge expense for poor people.

While travelling to Jaffna, villagers are also subjected to bag and body searches—first at their own island, then at the jetty of another island, and again before entering Jaffna at Pannai. From other parts of the peninsula, there are also checkpoints one after the other.

Prices in Jaffna are far higher than in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo. A popular milk-based food costs 300 rupees for a 450-gram packet, compared to 154 rupees in Colombo. Sugar prices have risen to 150 rupees per kilo, compared to 59 rupees in Colombo. Rice, the staple food in Sri Lanka, costs 65 rupees a kilo, more than double the price in the capital. Telephone calls cost 5 or 6 rupees per minute in Colombo, but in Jaffna the price is about 25 or 30 rupees.

Electricity supplies are gradually being curtailed. After the fighting first broke out, people had electricity for five hours during the day and four hours at night. Because of fuel shortages caused by the military’s blocking of transport routes, the hours have sometimes fallen to one or two in the day and four at night, depending on military operations.

A retired teacher waiting in a queue to buy goods at a shop in Kayts denounced the resumption of the war. “They just abandoned the ceasefire and we are caught in the middle. The government says the war is for the defence of the people, but we have been living without

jobs and food supplies for nearly a month. They said the curfew was imposed to protect us, but we are struggling with starvation. Is there no one to defend us?

“The government said they were launching the war in Muttur and Sampur with the consent of the big powers in the co-chairs [the US, EU, Japan and Norway—the co-chairs of the Sri Lankan donors’ group]. If so, these powers have approved the violation of the ceasefire agreement. The LTTE is also responsible for what is happening. They do not care about the people either.”

Fishermen co-operative officials planned to present a petition to the government agent for the Jaffna district, requesting assistance because of the navy’s bans on fishing.

Fishermen have even had to leave their fishing nets and other gear at the coast, as the navy would not allow them to bring it home. This gear is now getting spoiled. Some parents, unable to feed their children, have tried to fish illegally. If caught, however, they face physical attack and the seizure of their fishing passes by the navy.

After hearing a radio announcement that people could fish once the curfew was lifted, three young fishermen from Velanai went out to sea. The navy detained them for nearly three hours and only released them after seizing their fishing passes. Such incidents have generated great anger.

On August 30, while three fishermen from Paruthiadaippu, a village on Kayts, were fishing in waist-deep water, sailors patrolling in a small boat hit them with a rod and a rope. On August 8, five fishermen were beaten while fishing. One of the fishermen told the WSWS he was detained and later released only when his father refused to go without him.



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