Sri Lankan war refugees live in appalling conditions in southern India

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Fleeing death and destruction in Sri Lanka, around 15,000 people have escaped to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu since January, amid an escalating war on the island between the security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Most of the refugees are poor farmers, labourers and fishermen. They had to scrape together several thousand rupees to pay for their boat fares. In many cases, this was their life savings—some sold their belongings to meet the cost. They packed essential items into polythene-covered suitcases and bags for the 40-kilometre voyage.

Dozens of people had died making the risky journey in improvised boats. The Sri Lankan navy, which patrols the straits between the two countries, has arrested hundreds of refugees this year and handed them over to the police.

Refugees who make it to Tamil Nadu have to register at the Mandapam camp, 15 kilometres from Rameswaram on the eastern coast. Later, they are shifted to one of the 103 camps administered by the Tamil Nadu government. These hold 62,969 people, with more than 100,000 refugees living outside the camps. Most of the residents have been there since the 1990s.

Indian police screen all refugees for suspected LTTE members. An intelligence bureau official said: "They are checked for war-time scars. If we suspect that any of them were or are LTTE cadres, they are sent to special camps for militants in Chenglepet or Vellore."

The situation inside the camps is pathetic. The 287-acre camp at Mandapam has high walls with electric barbed-wire fencing. On the other side is the sea, patrolled by Indian coastal guards. The refugees live in a dilapidated row of houses.

Bathroom and toilet facilities are virtually non-existent. Most of the 830 toilets are blocked and have no roofs. Similarly, the "bathrooms" have no pipes, just open drains. Residents collect water from four outside wells. Even the streets are unlit. A 20-bed hospital runs without power and has limited medical facilities.

Even by Indian standards, the food rations and dole payments are not enough to live. Each refugee gets five litres of kerosene a month. Adults receive 500 grams of uncooked rice per day and children 400 grams. In addition, adults are expected to survive on monthly stipends of 144 rupees (about $US3) and children on 45 rupees.

Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam (DMK) government has promised to increase the dole to 400 rupees for family heads, but this is yet to be implemented.

Most refugees want decent jobs or to set up small businesses. However, they have become a source of cheap labour, exploited ruthlessly by local employers. In some instances, women have been forced into prostitution and drug running.

It is hardly surprising that the government wants to cover up the conditions in the camps. When the WSWS team visited the Mandapam refuge camp, the administrative officer prohibited interviews or photos. At the Dhanushkodi camp, after much persuasion, permission was granted to speak to refugees for just 30 minutes.

While exploiting the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils for its own political purposes, the DMK government is deliberately keeping the refugees isolated from the state's working and poor masses.

In August, almost all the Tamil Nadu parties, including the ruling DMK, condemned the atrocities being carried out by the Sri Lankan military. The opposition Marumalarachi Dravida Munnettra

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Kazaham (MDMK), the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and the Dalit Panther Party were particularly vociferous and organised public protests in Madras. None of the parties have spoken out about the plight of the refugees.

Refugees were eager to speak to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Raju described the situation in his hometown of Vavuniya, which is controlled by the Sri Lankan military. "Whenever a claymore mine exploded, the army started to shoot indiscriminately, so I decided to come here with my wife and baby. I am a building worker and we cannot get any work there. We sold whatever we had, and came here. We thought we could do any odd job here," he said.

"I had come here with my parents in 1995. Things improved in Sri Lanka a little when the cease-fire agreement was signed [in 2002]. Because of that we went back in 2002, rather than being a refugee here. In Sri Lanka I had to work every day to survive. If there was work I could earn up to 450 rupees per day. With this hard-earned money I built my own house. But the military was destroying houses and shelling civilians."

Raju said food prices had risen dramatically in Sri Lanka's north. "The government is spending millions on the military. As a result, a good country is being ruined. We have sold all our things and come here, because of [Sri Lankan President Mahinda] Rajapakse."

A young housewife explained that her family had to pay a large amount of money to escape. "For adults, the boats charged 6,000 to 10,000 rupees, and 3,000 rupees for children. We had to sell all our belongings and even our jewellery, all at low prices."

The boat in which she came had been crammed full with seven people. "In another boat there were ten. It capsized and I think they lost their lives. We never thought we would reach the shore. We want to live in freedom, like people live here in India."

"The [Sri Lankan] government is responsible for this. They talk about peace in the parliament, but then continue the war. They are abducting innocent people in white vans and also killing Muslims." She expressed her disapproval of the LTTE's role as well. "Nothing good will come out of either side. In a two-hour fight, 50 LTTE and 50 soldiers might die. But 100 ordinary people will also be killed."

Raji was married just nine months ago, but she fled, leaving her parents behind. In Sri Lanka, she had been hiding from the army. The military had arrested a friend of hers, on suspicion that he was a LTTE member. Later she was detained without charge for 14 days, before the International Committee of the Red Cross intervened. She fled as part of a group of 20 refugees.

"For five days before we left for India, we had no food. There was nothing left in the house. Both the LTTE and the army think we should support them. We are trampled in between. The army is camped in our rural agricultural society building. They are stealing from the abandoned houses, so the family elders are staying there." She said her entire life had been affected by the war.

Kumar, a building worker in his 30s, said: "I lived in Trincomalee town and I have four children. I came here with my parents in 1990 and later went back. Now after getting married, I have come here again with my wife and my four daughters.

"In the presidential election, the two main parties [United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)] offered nothing for the Tamil people. Therefore we did not vote for anyone. Neither the UNP nor the SLFP will bring peace.

"In the last general election, we voted for the TNA [Tamil National Alliance, a pro-LTTE group]. They have 22 MPs in the parliament, but no policy for us. In the Trincomalee region, Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims all live together. Now we have come here as refugees."

Kumar said the problem was not the ordinary Sinhalese, but the leaders. "We were affected by the tsunami [in December 2004]. At that time, Sinhala people helped us a lot. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people were living well with each other. Only at the top level, the leaders instigate racial hatred. Because of that, the Sinhalese and Muslims living in Trincomalee have left seeking asylum elsewhere... All people must come together to change this."

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