

Sri Lankan government detains all Tamils fleeing war zone

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Claims by the Sri Lankan government that it is "liberating" the country's north and will protect Tamil civilians if they flee the war zone have been exposed by detailed evidence that it is rounding up virtually all Tamil war refugees in what amount to concentration camps, and has plans to expand these facilities to house up to 200,000 people.

With the Sri Lankan army intensifying the offensive to seize the remaining areas held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in northern Mullaithivu, an estimated 250,000 civilians have been trapped by the fierce fighting.

Last week, when International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UN officials reported that hundreds of people had been killed or injured in artillery shell attacks, including inside designated "safe zones," the government and the military blamed the LTTE for any civilian casualties, accusing it of using people as "human shields".

In an attempt to deflect the ICRC and UN criticisms, President Mahinda Rajapakse last Thursday issued a 48-hour ultimatum, "urging" the LTTE to allow people to enter government-controlled areas. Rajapakse declared: "I also assure all those living in the North and in conflict areas in particular, that vacating LTTE-held areas will ensure their physical security and enable peace, freedom and rights for all citizens of this country."

However, a little-publicised Human Rights Watch (HRW) report released last December, titled "Besieged, Displaced, and Detained," makes clear that for almost a year the government has been incarcerating all Tamil civilians fleeing the fighting in the Vanni region, denying their fundamental legal and democratic rights, as well as adequate food, shelter and health and sanitation facilities, in flagrant violation of international law.

The report stated: "Since March 2008, Sri Lankan security forces have detained almost all ethnic Tamil civilians fleeing the Vanni, intercepting them when they approach government

controlled areas." Based on in-depth interviews with UN and aid agencies, diplomatic representatives and ordinary civilians affected by the conflict, HRW wrote: "All Tamils—including whole families—fleeing the Vanni have been detained on the apparent assumption that they are a security threat."

Approximately 1,000 people were being indefinitely detained under military guard at "welfare centres" in the Mannar and Vavuniya districts, and far larger camps were being prepared. "In September 2008, the Sri Lankan authorities informed the UN and humanitarian organisations that they were in the process of drawing up contingency plans to keep up to 200,000 displaced people from the Vanni in new camps in Vavuniya district, in case a mass outflux from the Vanni materialised."

In the same month, as government forces advanced toward the town of Kilinochchi, the LTTE's political and military headquarters, Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse ordered all UN and international humanitarian agencies to leave the Vanni. Only the ICRC and the locally staffed Caritas were permitted to continue operations. The HRW report said: "This policy has drastically worsened the plight of the civilian population, significantly reducing prospects that essential food, shelter, water, sanitation, and health care would reach affected individuals."

While the government insisted that the removal of aid agencies was necessary to protect their safety, HRW suggested that the move was designed to deny assistance to Tamils and prevent any reporting of their plight. "Sri Lankan officials also have shown overt hostility to outside agencies and humanitarian staff in recent months, suggesting that political considerations or a desire to remove independent observers from the scene might also have been behind the ouster."

HRW also accused the LTTE of forcibly blocking civilians in areas under its control from crossing into government-controlled territory, and forcing civilians to join the LTTE's ranks or perform forced labour. While the Rajapakse government has seized upon these practices to justify its own brutal methods, the report made clear that the dangers entailed

in crossing the frontlines, as well as the justified fear of persecution at the hands of the government, were major factors in restricting the number of refugees.

HRW commented: "Civilians seeking to flee the fighting in the Vanni also continue to be fearful of their treatment by government authorities... Most of the families and individuals stopped while crossing into government-controlled areas have been detained indefinitely in military-run camps... This makes them particularly vulnerable to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and other human rights abuses rampant in government-controlled territory."

The report gave details of the conditions in two camps holding more than 800 people. "The security forces send Tamils taken into custody to two so-called 'welfare centres' in Mannar district (additional camps in neighbouring Vavuniya district have also been established). Kalimodдай camp opened in March 2008; Sirukandal camp opened in July 2008. As of December 15, 2008, Kalimodдай housed 461 persons (202 families) and Sirukandal housed 345 persons (153 families). There were 226 children (persons under 18) in both camps...

"The camps are completely fenced, and are closely guarded by Sri Lankan navy and army personnel, and the police. The security forces have refused to allow the civilians to leave the camps—except under tight restrictions described below—and integrate into local communities or live with host families."

People who wished to leave the camps for work or other reasons "must request a daily pass from the security forces and leave behind another relative as 'guarantor' to ensure their return". In one reported incident, "a detained displaced person with a heart condition had to wait three days before being allowed to leave the camp for medical attention".

More than 400 other people had been detained by security forces at the Omathai checkpoint, and another 155 people who attempted to flee the Vanni in small boats on December 15, heading for Jaffna, were intercepted by the navy. They were being kept under military guard at the Jaffna courts complex.

HRW said aid agencies were required to obtain prior permission to enter the camps and were often subjected to questioning about the purpose of their visit. It was even difficult for relatives to visit detainees, and their conversations with camp residents were closely monitored by the military.

The security forces claimed that 13 camp residents had "escaped" but detainees had told aid workers the men may have been abducted or "disappeared". At least five detainees, all young men, had been arrested and taken into police custody. Nothing had been heard from them since, "creating fear among

other camp residents".

HRW noted that the longstanding violation of the basic rights of Tamil people had worsened markedly since last March. "Tamil civilians seeking to flee fighting in Sri Lanka's north during the 25-year-long civil war have long been subject to arbitrary detention in camps and other restrictions on their freedom of movement. Still, most could hope to stay with relatives or host families in other parts of Sri Lanka. The government's March 2008 decision to establish new camps seems intended to eliminate that possibility entirely."

A relative of a refugee detained in a camp at Kopay, about 8 kilometres from Jaffna, told the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions there. "It is a virtual prison," he explained. About 350 families were settled in temporarily erected tin-roofed huts, surrounded by barbed wire perimeter fences. Soldiers and policemen guarded the camp. There were no proper toilets.

"Police have interrogated people, particularly the youth, to gather information about them and they are viewed with suspicion," he added. Several youth had been taken to some other places.

"Only relatives have been allowed to see the refugees. Even relatives are not allowed to talk to refugees freely. If relative wants to see a person, he must get a pass from the police at the gate. They are given only about ten minutes to speak to their relative.

"Policemen who speak the Tamil language stand nearby to listen to the conversation and intimidate the relative, as well as the refugee. The military has now decided to allow only the parents of relatives to see refugees."

These conditions expose the bogus character of President Rajapakse's pledge to ensure the physical security and rights of refugees. The mass detention regime is a warning not only of what is in store for displaced Tamils, but the working class as a whole as social unrest begins to emerge in the response to the country's deepening economic crisis.



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