

Sri Lanka: War refugees to be detained in huge “welfare camps”

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Despite its claims to be waging a war to "liberate" the country's Tamil population, the Sri Lankan government in Colombo has drawn up plans for detention centres to house up to 200,000 Tamil civilians currently caught in the fighting between the army and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Aid agencies estimate that up to a quarter of a million civilians are trapped in the remaining pocket of land held by the LTTE in the north eastern Mullaithivu district. Most lack access to basic necessities, including food, clean water, shelter and medical care. The area has been indiscriminately pounded by the military with artillery and air strikes, leading to hundreds of deaths and many more injured.

Those who have managed to flee are being held by the security forces in transit points near the northern war zone before being dispatched to "welfare camps". A plan to extend the camps to hold all the remaining refugees has now been circulated to aid agencies and diplomats in Colombo in a bid to secure international backing and money.

Details of the plan, which was drawn up by the president's office, were leaked to the Associated Press by two aid agencies that were obviously disturbed by the implications. Yesterday the WSWs repeatedly tried to contact the ministerial secretary in charge, Rajiva Wijesinha, to obtain a copy and seek his comments, but he was constantly "unavailable".

In reality, the welfare camps or villages will be massive prisons. Five are to be built to house 40,000 to 50,000 families, or about 200,000 persons. Four are

planned near the town of Vavuniya and one in Mannar on the north-western coast. Refugees will not have a choice as to whether they are sent to a camp, nor will they be able to freely leave. The current proposal is to hold the refugees in these detention centres for up to three years.

The complexes will be self-contained. Each village will consist of 39,000 semi-permanent homes, 7,800 toilets and 780 septic tanks, as well as parks, post offices, banks, stores and about 390 community centres. Some 40 schools are planned for more than 86,000 students.

Aware of growing international criticism, government ministers and officials claimed that their only concern has been for the safety and welfare of the refugees. Minister of disaster management and human rights, Mahinda Samarasinghe, reassured the media that the "villages will be run by civilians" and no one would be forced to resettle prematurely.

However, Samarasinghe's ministerial secretary Rajiva Wijesinha made clear that the military would have "great involvement" in running the camps. The army will be involved in screening refugees, who face the prospect of being jailed indefinitely without charge as LTTE suspects. Speaking to the London-based *Times*, Wijesinha said: "Of course it will not be voluntary—we need to check everyone. This is a situation where we're dealing with terrorists who infiltrate civilian populations. Security has to be paramount."

A report issued by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) in December raised concerns that existing camps were being used as detention centres.

HRW said the media and human rights groups had been barred. No one was permitted to freely come and go. Those who left required a permit and a relative had to remain behind as a hostage. The facilities were surrounded by barbed wire and there was a heavy military presence.

Time magazine this week spoke to residents in a camp in the Mannar district that is holding about 450 people at present, including 39 under the age of five. Housing was rudimentary. There was barbed wire around the camp and soldiers constantly on guard. As the article explained, HRW and other international organisations had been pushing for the camps to be opened up. Instead, on January 10, the government turned them into "high security zones" and placed them off limits to everyone except the UN and International Committee of the Red Cross.

Most people told *Time* they did not want to stay in the camp. They explained that they had their documents and families willing to take them in, and enough money to support themselves. "We told all these things to the army commander," said one detainee, who described losing track of the number of letters he had written asking to be released. "I feel like I'm going crazy. I want to tell people that we are being kept without any reason."

Robert Evans, a British Labour politician who has visited Sri Lanka as chairman of the European Parliament delegation on Relations with South Asia, told the London *Times*: "These are not welfare camps; they are prisoner-of-war cum concentration camps." Britain's Department for International Development cautiously declared: "We do not believe that the current plans represent a sufficient solution by international humanitarian standards."

In an attempt to quell criticism, the government claimed that it had modified its plan so that 80 percent of refugees would be resettled by the end of 2009. It is a hollow promise. Speaking in parliament on Tuesday, chief government whip Dinesh Gunawardena acknowledged that 60,058 families displaced by the war still remained in 15 temporary camps in the Batticaloa and Amparai district more than 18 months

after President Mahinda Rajapakse declared the East to be "liberated".

Business leaders are already making plans to exploit war refugees as cheap labour. Rohan Masakorala, secretary general of the Joint Forum of Apparel Associations, told *Ravaya* on February 15 that his members were "optimistically looking at war victories". He continued: "It will be an advantageous situation for our business and the whole economy. The capture of land, people and the administration will always give a positive boost for capital investments."

"War refugees in the North and East will provide labour at a very lower price. It will be more advantageous to invest in garment factories in the north and east than in the south because of the possibility of obtaining labour at a lower price. We proposed to the government to set up free trade zones in the north and east because then we can get the maximum benefit."



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