

Sri Lankan government blocks international aid to detention camps

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Despite pleas from the UN and the International Red Cross, the Colombo government has refused to provide unrestricted access to its detention camps where at least 280,000 Tamil civilians are now being held in appalling conditions. According to the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, about 80,000 people have arrived in the camps in the past few days.

Last weekend, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government blocked aid trucks from the largest camp, Menik Farm, near the town of Vavuniya, which has more than 130,000 refugees, forcing the Red Cross to halt its activities. The government has also barred aid agencies and journalists from visiting the former war zone in the north-eastern Mullativu district, where about 1,000 patients had been trapped in makeshift hospitals.

Paul Castella, head of the Red Cross's Sri Lanka operations told Al Jazeera on Wednesday that the organisation had no option other than cease operations after the government imposed "additional restrictions" on that day "because of security". Castella added: "What is the fate of these civilians and what the conditions are we don't know, because we are not granted access to the area."

The government's actions have stopped the delivery of water, food, personal hygiene and other emergency items. A UNHCR spokesman said access to the camps was required urgently. "We've got lots of humanitarian supplies that need to be delivered."

The government has refused to explain how the aid distribution would threaten "security" after it militarily defeated the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last weekend. Its real concern is to hide what occurred in the war zone and the conditions in the detention centres.

Resettlement minister Rishard Badurdeen claimed that restrictions on foreign access to the refugees in the camps were necessary because of fears that LTTE fighters might be among them. "There are some 3,000 LTTE cadres in the camp and we haven't finished screening," he told the Associated Press. He

did not elaborate on the "screening" or how it prevented aid distribution.

UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, who is due in Sri Lanka today, met with Sri Lanka's health minister in Geneva on Tuesday and also pressed for access to the war zone. Elisabeth Byrs, spokeswoman for the UN's humanitarian operations, said the UN had no information on any injured civilians still in the war zone, but access needed to be granted to the UN or Red Cross "to evacuate any who remain".

From the limited reports that filtered out of the war zone, hundreds of civilians were killed as the army fought its final battles with the LTTE. That is why the government arrested the main witnesses of the military's war crimes—the three government doctors, Thurairaja Varatharajah, Thangamuttu Sathyamurthi and V. Shanmugarajah, who were treating the victims amid the fighting.

International human rights organisations raised concerns about the doctors' welfare after the government broke its silence and confirmed that they had been arrested for allegedly providing false information to the international media about the thousands of civilian casualties.

The Terrorist Investigation Division in Colombo is holding two doctors and the other was detained in hospital without any formal charges after sustaining injuries while fleeing the war zone. Human rights minister Mahinda Samarasinghe told Al Jazeera the doctors were under investigation for "possible collaboration with the LTTE," which is outlawed as a terrorist organisation in Sri Lanka.

Rejecting the allegations of LTTE involvement, Dr Shanmugarajah's brother-in-law, Suresh Kumar, said the doctor had told him two weeks ago there were "a lot of people in the hospital" and asked, "how could he leave the patients?" Mads Gilbert, a doctor at the Norwegian Aid Committee, told Al Jazeera: "They are instrumental to know what is going on... The most simple thing is for the government to execute them ... then they would have silenced them completely".

By “screening” the detention centres for alleged LTTE members, the government is also stamping out any opposition in the camps. Pro-government paramilitaries are abducting children as young as 12 with tacit official approval. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, an umbrella group that includes Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, said it had received verified reports of child abductions, even though the camps are surrounded by razor wire and patrolled by armed guards.

Charu Lata Hogg, a coalition spokeswoman, told the BBC: “Some are being taken away for ransom, they’ve been kidnapped for ransom, and there’ve been certain negotiated releases where mothers had some jewellery and they could negotiate a release right within the camp”. In other cases the children were “suspected of being former child soldiers” of the LTTE. She said several pro-government paramilitary groups, including the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party and Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam, apparently had unhindered access to the camps.

Disappearances of “LTTE suspects” by government-aligned death squads have been common over the past three years. Until the restrictions were imposed on aid groups, more than 1,800 former LTTE fighters had registered with the Red Cross and the government has yet to account for their fate. According to today’s *Irish Times*, reports have emerged of female LTTE fighters being murdered after surrendering to the authorities. The bodies of 11 young women were allegedly found with their throats cut outside the Menik Farm camp.

Even before the aid restrictions, conditions in the camps were atrocious. UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond said refugees coming from the war zone were “sick, hungry and suffering from acute malnourishment and dehydration” and the camps were “overcrowded” with “limited services” available.

UNICEF Sri Lankan spokesman James Elder said that until the restrictions, “UNICEF and partners were working around the clock supplying millions of litres of water, constructing latrines, supporting mother and child health, establishing nutritional centres, building learning spaces for children, and working on reunifying separated children.”

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said people were in “desperate need of medical care”. MSF said it was “overwhelmed” by the sudden influx since last Friday, despite increased numbers of staff. Though around 10,000 people arrived daily at the main Vavuniya checkpoint, MSF could treat only 200 seriously ill patients.

Katrien Coppens, MSF operational manager in Amsterdam,

said: “In order to prioritise the most critically ill and wounded, many patients in need of treatment simply cannot receive immediate care. About 1,900 patients are currently at Vavuniya hospital, which has only a 450-bed capacity. Many of them are lying on mattresses on the floor and in the corridors.”

Nearly 100,000 refugees are suffering malnutrition and another 50,000 people are expected to arrive within days. Save the Children, an international relief organisation, said that without immediate extra food and water, the lives of mothers and children were in danger. The organisation’s Dr Balwant Singh told the British-based *Telegraph*: “Mothers and children have already suffered greatly after weeks of being trapped without adequate access to food, water and medical attention.”

Laxman Hulugalle, director-general of the National Security Media Centre, expressed the government’s contempt for the Tamil refugees, saying: “You cannot expect five-star hospitality in a place like that. We are providing the basics ... You cannot expect an Oxford college.”

The Rajapakse government has depopulated the entire northern region, from north-western Mannar to north-eastern Mullativu. Most civilians are in detention centres, despite many pleading to be able to return to their homes. The government’s initial plan to imprison them for at least three years has been modified in the face of international outrage. After visiting Indian ministers met Rajapakse to express their concerns, a joint statement yesterday announced a 180-day plan to resettle most detainees.

However, the government is still claiming that damaged infrastructure necessitates delays to resettlement, pointing to an underlying agenda to collectively punish the Tamil population. As in the “liberated East” of the island, the government is preparing to maintain the northern areas under military occupation for years to come.



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