

# Sri Lankan Tamil detainees still held in terrible conditions

Sarath Kumara  
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Despite legal challenges by detainees and expressions of concern by UN and international aid agencies, the Sri Lankan government is continuing to hold nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians indefinitely in huge internment camps. Not only are the detainees denied their basic legal and democratic rights, but now face growing dangers of disease.

Only a handful of elderly people and young children have been released from the camps, with the government insisting that the vast majority must remain behind the barbed wire fences until the military can weed out supporters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). According to a June 11 situation report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 280,812 people have now been placed in the camps, but just 2,234 have been released. There is no sign that Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse intends to keep the promise made last month to resettle all detainees within six months.

With the onset of the monsoon due, aid agencies are warning that the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions could produce a water-borne disease epidemic. Chicken pox, hepatitis and diarrhoea outbreaks have been reported in the camps. Richard Schmidt, Sri Lankan head of the international humanitarian organisation Solidar in Vavuniya, said the outbreaks would worsen, “if water and sanitation does not improve”.

According to OCHA, as of 5 June, the UN Refugee Agency and its partners had erected some 6,500 emergency shelters and more than 13,000 tents, to supplement existing shelter, but much more was needed. Neil Buhne, the UN resident coordinator in Sri Lanka, told the IRIN news service that the situation was unsatisfactory because there were “too many people in too small a place”. Around 10 to 15 people lived in tents made for five people.

Buhne added: “In some places there is only one toilet for

100 refugees.” He said the standard should be one to every 20 refugees. Some pit latrines that were built in November 2008 when the largest camp, Menik Farm near Vavuniya, was first opened were overflowing, causing discontent among the refugees.

In a statement issued on July 11, the World Vision charity said it was gravely concerned that impending monsoon rains and inadequate sanitation would place tens of thousands of people at risk from disease. The organisation said that “to maintain international minimum standards” at least “11,500 more latrines are needed” in Menik Farm. “With the monsoon expected to arrive within the next two weeks, at least 2,500 are needed immediately to meet even the most basic needs and to prevent a potential health crisis.”

Adnan Khan, the country head of the World Food Programme (WFP), said it urgently needed \$US35 million to continue providing rations for the detainees. If the money was not available immediately there would be a shortfall because it would take three to six months to ship the food to Sri Lanka. Khan said the WFP had been able to provide basic rations so far, but food for infants and lactating mothers was a problem.

Those aid agencies permitted to work in the camps said they now had better access to deliver supplies, but not to provide other support and advocacy services. The media and opposition politicians are still banned. World Vision said it “continues to advocate for adherence to international minimum standards in camp management, support and care for the displaced and their speedy return to their own homes or locations of their choice”.

At a Geneva media conference on June 19, UN emergency relief coordinator John Holmes said the detainees needed to be permitted to resume normal lives in order to ease tensions. Despite improved access for aid providers, “what is more worrying is the nature of the camps themselves.

They could be described as internment camps in some respects, in the sense that people are not allowed to move freely in and out of them for the moment.”

Far from releasing the detainees, the Colombo government has denied responsibility for even providing basic facilities. Resettlement Minister Risath Bathiuddeen told the BBC Sinhala service Sandeshaya that it was the duty of the UN and not the Sri Lankan government to provide adequate toilet facilities. He said the UN was receiving international funds and “the delay is from their part”.

Citing security reasons, the government has permitted only some detainees under 10 years of age and over 60 years to leave the camps. Tamils even as young as 11 or 12 are considered LTTE suspects.

The treatment of the Tamil refugees demonstrates the entrenched chauvinism of the Colombo political elite. While arbitrarily incarcerating and denying the fundamental democratic rights of the Tamil refugees, President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government does not even recognise their right to elementary sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Nor is there any concern for the deaths occurring inside the camps. Lionel Premasiri, Deputy Minister in charge of social services, said that most of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) were elderly and children and “it is natural that some elderly people die in the camps”. Premasiri dismissed complaints about the poor and over-crowded accommodation, saying: “Of course conditions are not similar to their own homes or hotels but we have provided them with adequate facilities”.

In a statement on Wednesday, Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena tacitly admitted that the conditions in the camps were appalling, saying, “anyone or group can assist and help the refugees but the government will not let anyone to capitalise on their grievances”. He insisted that the government would not allow political parties and NGOs to gain political mileage and secure foreign funds.

While the government has sought to cover up the shocking conditions in the camps, the ban on non-government agencies and media visiting the camps is also aimed at preventing the internees speaking out about their ordeal while trapped in the war zone. In the final phase of the army’s offensive, the remaining pockets of LTTE territory were subjected to indiscriminate bombardment. Among the detainees are many people who experienced the war crimes first-hand and could be witnesses in any investigation.

The government’s determination to prevent any inquiry was highlighted this week by its decision to close down its own investigation into several incidents during the military’s thrust in the East in 2006-2007. The Presidential Commission of Investigation (COI) headed by former Supreme Court judge Nissanka Udalgama, was established in 2006 to investigate killings, enforced disappearances and assassinations. It ended without any conclusion on June 14, because the government refused to extend its mandate.

Elaine Pearson, Human Rights Watch deputy director for Asia, commented: “The need for an international inquiry into abuses by both sides is greater than ever.” But the government refused to even release to the public the seven reports that the COI submitted before being shut down.

Among the cases entrusted to the commission were the killings of former pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MP Joseph Pararajasingham, 17 Tamil aid workers attached to the French NGO, Fight Against Hunger, in Muttur, and five Tamil students in Trincomalee. In each of these cases, the evidence pointed in the direction of the military or associated paramilitary forces.

This week, the government also opposed and successfully delayed two legal cases in the Supreme Court challenging its violation of the fundamental rights of detainees under the Sri Lankan constitution, including freedom of movement and freedom from arbitrary detention. Increasingly, Rajapakse’s military-backed regime is operating with open contempt for legal and democratic rights, defying both international law and the country’s own constitution.



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