

Sri Lanka: Inside the Manik Farm detention centre

Our correspondent
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The following report was provided by an elderly person who visited several relatives being held in one of the internment camps set up by Sri Lankan authorities to house nearly 300,000 civilians who fled during the final weeks of fighting between the army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Manik Farm is about 30 kilometres from the northern town of Vavuniya. It is the biggest camp established by the army, housing more than 160,000 Tamil refugees. They fled from the last strip of territory held by the LTTE after facing constant shelling by the military.

One reaches Manik Farm only after the harrowing process of passing through several army checkpoints. What one sees is a huge open prison with men, women, children, the elderly and the injured. It is behind barbed and razor wire fences and guarded by heavily armed security personnel.

There are rows and rows of small tents or rooms made of aluminum seats or wooden planks. Basic facilities like water and sanitation are inadequate. At least two families live in each tent or room. When the wind blows or a vehicle passes by, people are showered with dust.

There are four camps at Manik Farm: Ramanathan, Kadirgamar, Arunachalam and Anandakumaswamy. Each houses nearly 40,000 people. Armoured vehicles travel up and down the road near the camps frequently. People are not allowed to walk along the main road from one camp to another. They have to hire a three-wheeler taxi and pay 100 to 150 rupees for one or two kilometres.

Visitors have to walk through the barbed wire fences to an open space near the camp. Small huts act as waiting rooms. Hundreds of visitors are waiting to see their loved ones and there is not enough room in the

huts. Many have to stand outside in the burning sun. There are no toilets. For drinking water there is a plastic water barrel in each hut. Outside there are small shops that serve tea and a few snacks.

The police officers arrive after 9 a.m. to register your details, including your name and the unit number and block number of the detainee you are going to visit. Mobile phones and cameras are banned. You have to leave them at one of the shops. Some shopkeepers charge 50 rupees just to look after a mobile phone.

There are several of my relatives in camps in Manik Farm. I first went to Ramanathan camp hoping to see one of my sisters and her sons. A Tamil-speaking man in civilian clothes arrived and started to collect the details of detainees each of us was going to visit. I gave my details to him. He abruptly said I couldn't visit that day. They have allocated separate days for each camp.

Although I argued that I had come from Colombo, he told me that nothing could be done. He refused to let me speak to a senior officer to complain. I was compelled to abandon the idea of meeting my relatives there. Then I visited Kadirgamar camp and had to go through the same process.

They called my brother but he was on the other side of a barbed wire fence. He was crying. I saw several persons crying after seeing their relatives. Some have been separated from their parents. Some have been separated from their spouses.

Meeting a relative is like speaking to a prisoner. You only get 15 to 30 minutes. The police on guard come to tell you when the time is up. No one gets more time. You can give basic gifts such as food and clothing but only after they are thoroughly checked. The police are checking all the time you are talking.

My brother explained to me that because of the war he had to move from one place to another from mid-

December. Finally they reached Mathala in the Mullaithivu coastal area. There were tens of thousands of people there. They did not have enough food and just had the clothes they arrived in. They kept running from one trench to another under the thunder of shelling. Many died.

Finally they decided to leave in April. They trekked about 8 kilometres. The army first tried to shoot them. Then they were asked to wait several hours. Thereafter the army took them to Manik Farm. For two weeks they were provided with pre-cooked food parcels.

Now they have been given 4 vessels and a few spoons to cook with. Each person receives 3 kilograms of rice, 3 kg of flour and 300 grams of sugar and a little dhal [lentils] for a month. The army has opened a few shops to sell vegetables and other food items. But without any money most people cannot buy anything. They cannot imagine eating vegetables and other food and have to live on what they are given.

Drinking water is supplied by lorries, but that too is not enough. There is a river running through the camp but with very little water to have a bath. People have no soap. The toilets are built with polythene or aluminum seats. However, there are not enough.

Soldiers or policemen in civilian clothes roam around the camp even checking the toilets. No one is allowed to even stand in the shade outside a hut. They are scolded and told to leave.

Most parents with teenagers never sleep at night because they are worried their sons and daughters will be abducted. The names of young people are often called out and they have to go to the office. The officials say they are being investigated. Some of them come back, others do not. Even the parents are not informed where they have been taken and why.

It is a terrible situation.



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