

Sri Lankan Tamil detainees give eye-witness accounts

Our correspondents
24 June 2009

It is now more than one month since the Sri Lankan military detained the final batch of Tamil refugees fleeing the northern war zone on May 19. They joined more than a quarter of a million civilians already incarcerated in camps set up near Vavuniya and on the Jaffna Peninsula during the last phase of the war. About 160,000 people are interned in four units in the biggest camp, known as Manik Farm.

In order to brush off criticism of the denial of democratic rights and terrible conditions in the camps, the government falsely claimed that most detainees would be resettled within six months. However, senior military officials have told Mark Cutts, a UN senior coordinator at Manik Farm, that they expect 80 percent of the people to be still detained in a year's time. Cutts told the BBC that the government was building permanent structures at Manik Farm. Nothing less than a new city had been created, he said, with phone lines, schools, banks and even a cash machine.

The government is treating all the detainees as suspected supporters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), saying that no-one can be released until the camps have been screened to identify those with LTTE connections. Every day 20 to 30 young people are taken away and their whereabouts are unknown, a human rights organisation, INFORM, reported this week. Interviewed by the BBC Sinhala Service, a spokesperson for the organisation said people wearing hoods were brought into the camps and they indicated by signs whether a detainee had LTTE connections or not.

No register is being kept of such removals, in violation of Sri Lankan and international law, and the media has been excluded from the camps to prevent any reporting of the conditions in the camps or the fate of the nearly 9,000 youth that the government has admitted taking away to separate detention facilities. Their parents do not know what has happened to them.

A report in the right-wing *Island* newspaper on June 16 provided a glimpse of how the military and police authorities are applying pressure to the Tamil youth to declare support for

the government. According to the article, a deputy inspector general of police Nimal Lewke addressed over 2,000 detainees at the Neriyaikulam Technical College and told them that President Mahinda Rajapakse was "their only hope". Lewke told the *Island* that about 8,729 youth were being held in several detention centres at Vavuniya as LTTE cadres, including about 1,700 young women, and that 283,000 displaced people were in camps at Vavuniya, with 11,000 more on the Jaffna Peninsula.

Because of the government's exclusion of the media, the only source of information is the testimonies of detainees relayed by relatives. We publish below two interviews given by relatives who visited two Manik Farm camps, in which they report the conditions there, as well as detainees' accounts of the military's shelling of civilians in the final stages of the war.

On the day I visited the camp, Education Minister Susil Premjayantha and Resettlement Minister Rishad Bathiuddeen were meeting with some NGOs [non-government organisations] in the camp. So we had to wait until they left. Police officers were controlling the people, wielding batons.

Speaking about the last days of the war, my relative told me: "The military fired more than a thousand shells an hour. The shells fell on people because there was a smaller chance of falling on the land--people were so crowded into a tiny area. About 1,400 people killed on the day when I was injured. I saw this in the hospital. I do not know how many died on the spot. I was admitted to Mullivaikkal hospital. After few days, they took me by ship to (eastern) Pulmoddai hospital. Again I was transferred to Polonnaruwa hospital. Later they brought me to Vavuniya and finally here. They photographed me each time when they transferred me.

"We are like prisoners here. Why don't they allow us to go out? The toilets are overflowing. There is a lack of water to use toilets and for other needs. There are some tube wells for drinking water. For that we have to wait in a long queue. We have to bathe in a river running behind the camp. However if

we bathe in that river continuously, some skin diseases will spread among us. A doctor visits the camp only once a week. Sometimes essential medicines are not available. We have to obtain a token two days in advance to consult the doctor for any severe illness.

“We are living with fear. We do not know what will happen at anytime. The foreign representatives who visit here do not know the real situation. We are not allowed to speak with them. When the UN secretary general [Ban Ki-moon] visited, the authorities took half the detainees out of Kadirgamar camp and cleaned it up. They showed him each family with a tent. They took him only to that camp.”

An elderly person who was leaving the camp with a relative who was released after nearly a month of requests, said: “I think we were the first people who crossed into the military-controlled area after the government announced that we could do so. But the treatment that the young and middle-aged people got and the words used against us made me think that I should have died starving rather than come here.

“Now of course they have put up tin sheets and thatched roofs. When we came here it was almost like a jungle. Numbers of families had to live in one hut. Because it is hot, people can sleep anywhere but the problems start if it begins to rain. If it rains, you can’t even walk because of the muddy land.

“Since we came here many of the parents with children have never slept at night for fear that their children would be taken away. There were numbers of such incidents. We had no lights, so nobody knew what was going on.”

A 60-year-old person who visited a camp to see his children said: “I went from one camp to another searching for the family of my daughter who was in Kilinochchi. Yesterday I went to a camp at Periyakattu in Vavuniya, which opened soon after the government announced its war victory. But visitors are not allowed there. The military considers those interns to be strong supporters or associates of the LTTE because they were there in the war zone until the last minute.”

I went to a camp recently to see some of my relatives detained there. We wrote down the name of the detainee we wanted to visit, his block and tent number and handed it over to the officers, who seemed to be intelligence officers or members of paramilitary groups working with the military.

They announced our visit by loud speakers. We were not sure whether the message had gotten to the particular relative. However, we stayed in the queue for checking. Officers checked all our bags and parcels, and our bodies. No shopping

bags, betel and areca nut, big bags, boxes or hand phones were allowed.

We had to talk with our relatives through the barbed wire fence. We were allowed just 15 minutes. There were about 60 or 70 visitors talking to their relatives behind the fence, so it was difficult to hear or respond to each other.

My relative, 19, described his experience under the military’s shelling attacks in Mullivaikkal: “There were pieces of shells in the backbone of my mother. We think the shells were fired by the army. Medical staff would only give medicine without removing the shrapnel, because they said she would become paralysed or unconscious if the pieces were removed. After my mother was injured, I carried her and moved secretly during an entire night, without the knowledge of the LTTE, to reach the military-controlled area.

“My brother, who is 13, must study in grade 7 and I in the advanced level. But we have not been able to go to school for more than six months. The officials said they would arrange for us to study in the advanced level.

“They cook meals here for us. This morning it was porridge. For lunch, they gave us rice with soya meat, pumpkin, dhal and dried fish. We may have porridge tonight also. People who were able to find pans were cooking, but when a temporary tent burned down [due to a cooking fire], we were asked to stop cooking.

“We are facing a huge lack of water and there are lots of flies here. They gave us a floor sheet to put inside the tent, but the flies live on those sheets.” As we talked, flies flocked around our faces.

Another relative I wanted to meet did not turn up although I lined up in the queue three times. He may not have received the message about my visit. On my third attempt, I met another detainee I know and managed to send things for my relative through him. That detainee, a government employee told me:

“We are unable to get a good meal. The meals are not tasty—they are just to prevent hunger. I do my job here and they pay me. How many days do we have to suffer this camp life? There is no water here. Smallpox and mumps are spreading.”



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