

# Sri Lanka: Tamil detainees kept in appalling conditions

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Despite considerable international pressure, the Sri Lankan government is continuing to block free access for the media and aid agencies to the military-run internment camps where more than 275,000 Tamil civilians have been detained under shocking conditions since fleeing the military's final offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the country's north.

Aid agencies have been given restricted access to some camps but the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has warned that the access remains inadequate to meet the vast needs of the detainees. ICRC president Jakob Kellenberger last week described the situation as serious. "It is essential that we obtain access to all IDPs [internally displaced persons] in order to provide medical care, water and other essentials."

Although some international media representatives accompanied UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on his brief visit to the camps last month, and reporters have since participated in short visits under tight military control, no independent reporting has been permitted.

The Sri Lankan regime has been emboldened by last Wednesday's UN Human Rights Council resolution that effectively endorsed its treatment of the detainees and specifically backed its decision to provide only "access as may be appropriate" to international aid agencies. The resolution also blocked any international inquiry into the bombings and shellings of civilian targets and other war crimes committed by the military in the northern war zone.

The restrictions on access serve two clear purposes—to cover up the appalling conditions in the camps, where there is also mounting evidence of military-backed disappearances of alleged LTTE sympathisers, and to prevent refugees from speaking to journalists about what happened during the final weeks of the military's onslaught.

Limited reports being filtered out from the camps give a glimpse of the overcrowded and squalid conditions, which the international humanitarian organisation Christian Aid yesterday described as "an epidemic waiting to happen". The organisation's director,

Robin Greenwood, said: "A combination of monsoon rains, poor drainage and over-crowding is the ideal breeding ground for diseases like cholera and typhoid." He warned that a disease outbreak was imminent "if the government does not tackle the problem of overcrowding and sanitation." The aid agency said 30 people were living in tents designed five people.

UN officials said the camps remained overcrowded and that basic items like cooking pots and blankets were in short supply. Elizabeth Byrs, a UN spokesperson in Geneva, said: "These people in the camps need more assistance. They are in a dire situation... we need to build more shelters." Another agency, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, said many refugees were suffering from injuries, malnutrition and severe trauma after being trapped for months in the war zone.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported on May 26 that many people arriving at the largest camps, around the town of Vavuniya, needed urgent medical care. A four-member MSF team had treated patients at the area's Omanthai checkpoint because the 400-bed hospital in Vavuniya was overcrowded with over 1,900 patients.

Dr Alexa ter Horst, a Dutch MSF doctor, said patients had "wounds or scars from bullets and shelling". She added: "Many people had surgical procedures in the conflict zone. Some wounds are old and have healed, but others are bleeding—either because the wound is recent or because it has reopened." Among the patients was a 13-year-old girl with shrapnel embedded in her back.

Dr Matthew Deeter, one of four MSF surgeons working in the Vavuniya hospital, said he was doing 30 surgeries per day, compared to the normal load of five. "We sometimes work together on the same patient; one is amputating the leg and the other is amputating the arm. Or one is taking care of wounds in a foot and the others are treating chest wounds. The majority of the injuries are relatively mild, but we see lots of them on the same patients—something like 20 mild injuries for one person, caused by a bomb blast."

Statistics released by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on May 30 estimate that 276,785 people fled into government-controlled territory from the war zone between October 27 last year and May 28. Of these, 274,468 remained detained, while 2,317 had been hospitalised. Only 1,537 people

had been released, mostly “elderly, mentally challenged individuals and other vulnerable groups”.

Even a prominent government supporter, V. Anandasangaree, the leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front, said he had received disturbing reports from people inside the camps. Obviously acting under pressure from anxious Tamils across Sri Lanka, he told the BBC: “Health, water and sanitation situation is horrible. Many people are having skin diseases, as they didn’t get a chance to have a shower for days because of water shortage. Pregnant mothers and newborn babies go through a harrowing time in the camps due to scorching heat”.

Anandasangaree felt compelled to criticise the government for viewing every Tamil civilian in the camps as a LTTE suspect. “If the government suspects such people as Tamil Tigers, then the entire population of the two districts—Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu—should be suspects,” he said.

President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government has claimed that it needs to keep the camps closed in order to weed out LTTE infiltrators. It has reported the internment of about 9,000 LTTE suspects but there is evidence of wider killings and disappearances at the hands of pro-government Tamil paramilitary groups operating with impunity behind the camps’ barbed-wire fences.

According to yesterday’s *Australian*, rights campaigners and aid workers said a large number of people, including 80 former LTTE child soldiers, had gone missing from the camps. “The problem in this country is terror and impunity,” one aid worker said. “There are never investigations.”

Under the mounting international criticism, the government has promised to resettle refugees within six months. But its own statements demonstrate that it has no plans to do so in the near future. Ports and water minister Chamal Rajapakse, President Rajapakse’s elder brother, said last Saturday that resettling would commence only after the government was completely sure of the security situation in local neighbourhoods.

This professed concern for the safety of the refugees is a sham. The entire northern area, from Mannar on the western coast to the eastern Mullaitivu coast, has been depopulated. Even the TULF’s Anandasangaree was forced to reject Rajapakse’s excuse. He said he had been told by local people that 75 percent of the area was not land-mined and that they knew where the landmines had been placed.

The government has announced that it intends to release people over 60 years of age. Even if individual elderly people eventually obtain approval to leave, most will find it difficult to move out. With their relatives still inside the camps, including their children, they will be unable to survive.

The plan to release those over 60 is not motivated by concern for their well-being. Expressing the government’s contempt for the Tamil masses, Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona told the

*Australian* that refugees were “a burden on the exchequer”. Last weekend’s *Sunday Times* noted in its economic analysis column that the plan was “one of the strategies already adopted” for “reducing the costs effectively, especially at this initial stage”.

There are growing signs that any resettlement plans are designed to benefit the interests of the Sinhala elites that dominate the Colombo government. Kohona said “original inhabitants” would be permitted to return to their lands, but subject to the claims of 80,000 Muslims who left the north during the 1990s and the “right” of business people and those “of other ethnicities who wish to move to other parts of the country”.

The army has already announced that it will increase its numbers from 200,000 to 300,000 in order to permanently occupy the north. In addition, families of security force members will be settled in security villages in the north on land confiscated from Tamils. Unable to address the grievances of the Tamil masses after decades of discrimination, the government is planning to alter the demographics of the north, as well as the east.

In the eastern provinces that have been previously captured by the military since the government resumed the war in 2006, harassments, abductions, disappearances and killings have been used to chase Tamils out to make way for new projects. In the Trincomalee district, 97 people were reported missing last year, and many are suspected victims of pro-government Tamil paramilitaries. An aid worker told the *Australian* that he knew 15 people who had disappeared. Three were found dead, and bore signs of torture.

A similar regime is being prepared for the north of the island when detainees are finally allowed to leave the present detention camps.



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