

Sri Lanka: Jaffna residents speak out over increasing military repression

Our correspondents
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Jaffna residents in Sri Lanka's north spoke with the WSWs last week over continuing military repression and the ongoing detention of more than 300,000 Tamils in the Vavuniya internment camps. Many had relatives or friends who were either killed or injured in the fighting between the Sri Lankan army and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or who are now being held in detention camps.

An unpublished UN report estimates that about 7,000 innocent men, women and children were killed and tens of thousands wounded after being trapped between Sri Lankan military and LTTE forces. The Sri Lankan military showered the so-called "no fire zone" with artillery shells and gunfire during the last weeks of fighting.

Jaffna residents explained that they had been unable to hold religious ceremonies or publicly mourn their dead relatives because they feared being accused of supporting the LTTE and facing reprisals. All voiced their anger and outrage over the mass detentions.

One person asked the WSWs: "Is there no way to help the interned? How can we help them? The wife of my brother, who is in a camp, cried, telling me that her daughter has only one piece of clothing, which is a school gown.

"The Eelam People's Democratic Party [EPDP] is collecting goods to send to these refugees but it's a partner of the government. People are suspicious about whether refugees will get these goods."

These concerns are well-founded. EPDP leader Douglas Devananda is a cabinet minister in the Colombo government and supported the communal war against the Tamils. The organisation maintains a paramilitary wing which directly operates with the army and navy in the Jaffna islands and peninsular.

"How long are they going to keep detaining hundreds of thousands of people? The detainees have done nothing but the government and the military treat them as the enemy and part of the LTTE. This is proven by their ongoing detention. The government says it wants to remove mines from the war zone in the Vanni but thousands of people have houses in Jaffna and Vavuniya. Why can't the government release these people? It is lying," the person said.

Unable to control his grief, a 48-year-old man cried, and holding this correspondent's hand, said: "When I heard about these camps and what was happening there I thought they were similar to the Nazi camps." He explained that one man he knew had been captured by the army while he was travelling from the war zone with his sister's small children. He is now being held in a camp but does not know what has happened to the children.

Another resident told us that his friend's wife had been taken for medical treatment for injuries caused by gun fire and had disappeared. His friend has no idea where his wife is.

These comments are not exaggerated. Those interned include thousands of public servants, 6,700 people over 60-years-old and more than 50,000 children under-10. An estimated 850 children who were orphaned during the fighting are also being held in the camps.

While those we spoke to in Jaffna had little sympathy for the LTTE, having directly experienced its anti-democratic methods, few believed that the end of the war would bring the restoration of democratic rights.

In Jaffna, there has been no relaxation of the military presence or its activities with frequent foot and vehicle patrols of the town and other areas. In fact, preparations are underway for permanent military occupation.

In and around Jaffna city, the distance between check points has been reduced from 150-200 metres to 50-100 metres. There are also checkpoints in the coastal areas near Jaffna town, such as Navandurai, Gurunagar, Pasaiur and Ariyalai. Some check points, previously built with sandbags and tin, have been upgraded with brick and cements and made permanent.

The police and military have established so-called “Peace Committees” in some villages, claiming that these organisations will intervene to solve problems among the civilians. Their real purpose is to function as intelligence gathering units and monitor all opposition to the military occupation and the government.

Military and police searches were previously conducted mainly during the day. Since the end of the war these operations are now occurring day and night and involve groups of 15 soldiers.

This correspondent witnessed one house-search operation in Vaddukoddai, near Jaffna town last week. Well-armed soldiers equipped with search-lights arrived at one home at about 8 p.m. They searched the garden around the house and then asked the residents for a family registry card, scrutinised it and then moved on to other houses.

While the military claims these searches are to prevent LTTE cadres infiltrating Jaffna, their real purpose is to terrorise the Tamil population. All Tamils in the northern and eastern provinces and in Colombo and its suburbs have to register with the police and obtain a registry card. Those not registered can be arrested. The measure is clearly aimed at deepening communal discrimination and repression.

All fishing restrictions remain. Fishermen are required to carry an official pass and are confined to one specific area and the shallow waters. Fishing between 5 p.m. and 7 a.m. is prohibited and on some islands near Jaffna, such as Karainagar, fishing is restricted to five days a week.

The government claims that it will reopen the A9 road, the main land link between Colombo and Jaffna but last Thursday the minister for highways announced that it would take another year to remove land mines. The A9 will only be open for the transport of goods, in part because the government is determined to prevent people visiting the Vavuniya detention camps or witnessing the destruction and depopulation of the Vanni.

The only transport into Jaffna is by plane or ship and is very expensive. An air ticket to Jaffna is around 18,000 rupees (\$US175) as compared to 11,000 rupees for international flights to Chennai, capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

By sea, the fare from eastern Trincomalee to Kankasanthrai (KKS) in Jaffna is 3,080 rupees and takes about 15 hours. In order to travel from Colombo to Trincomalee, passengers must register with Trincomalee’s divisional administration and can only board the ship if given a navy security clearance. Mobile phones must be given to the navy guard on board.

On arrival at KKS port passengers are transported by navy bus to Thellipalai, a junction on the road to Jaffna, where they are subjected to more security checks. Everyone has to produce the family card and national identity card and be photographed by army personnel. Mobile phones and baggage are then returned. Passengers then travel by bus to Jaffna after passing several more check points. Air travellers to Jaffna are subjected to similar security checks.

The prices of basic items on the Jaffna peninsular remain high and they are in short supply. Rice, for example, is 90 to 110 rupees, 20 to 40 rupees higher than Colombo price. Sugar, dhal and flour prices are also much more expensive than in Colombo.

President Mahinda Rajapakse claims that the north will be developed under a so-called Uthuru Vasanthaya (Spring of the North) program. This policy, however, is aimed at attracting big investors who will profit from cheap labour conditions enforced by the military occupation and ongoing repression of the local population.



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