

Mounting death toll in Sri Lankan detention camps

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About 1,400 people are dying from disease every week inside Sri Lanka's largest camps at Manik Farm, according to senior international aid sources, the British-based *Times* reported last week. The report is the latest evidence that conditions in the military-controlled detention centres, where nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians are being held, are worsening.

July 19 will mark two months since final batch of Tamil war refugees was interned in the camps near the northern town of Vavuniya after the government declared a military victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on May 19.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's government has dubbed the camps "welfare centres" but the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions underscore the reality of the collective punishment of the Tamil population. Aid workers have warned that the conditions are inadequate, with most of the deaths resulting from water-borne diseases, particularly diarrhoea.

Manik Farm, about 30 kilometres from Vavuniya, houses some than 160,000 refugees who fled the last strip of LTTE-held territory after facing constant shelling by the military. There are about 130,000 detainees in 32 other camps near Vavuniya and some 10,000 in centres on the Jaffna Peninsula.

The razor- and barbed wire-fenced camps are guarded by armed soldiers. Army intelligence units are continuing to seize youth from the camps as LTTE suspects without even informing their parents or relatives where they are being taken.

The *Times* also reported that aid agencies are being given only intermittent access to the camps. Even the Red Cross, the main agency given limited access for relief work, has not been allowed in on some days.

The Colombo-based *Sunday Times* reported yesterday that six doctors would travel to Vavuniya today to investigate reports of "suspected" outbreaks of the deadly diseases, meningitis and encephalitis. According to the reports, 65 adults are suffering from either one of the ailments, and 35 have already died. Several displaced children at the Vavuniya General Hospital are also thought to be victims of the two diseases.

A health ministry official admitted the disease outbreak, telling the newspaper: "This issue has been going on for some time now but the hospital does not have the expertise to diagnose the cause. The deaths occurred during the past three to four months." According to the official, who did not want to reveal his name for fear of government reprisal, there were only 20 nurses serving all the camps and 80 doctors on duty at the medical centres.

Significantly, the government-employed doctors working in the detention camps and hospitals have also spoken out. The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) has complained about the severe shortage of nurses and pharmacists in the detention camps and hospitals. The GMOA said there was a lack of medical expertise to identify the diseases.

GMOA spokesman Upul Gunasekera told the *Sunday Times*: "There were no nurses yesterday. We only saw one nurse and she too came from outside with a team of

doctors. We need about 120 doctors and at least 300 nurses in the camps. At the Chettikulam hospital [an improvised hospital near Manik Farm] there are 130 children receiving treatment and there is only one doctor but no nurses. How can one doctor look after all the patients?”

Dr Gunasekara added: “The ministry has no plans to send nurses to these camps and the people are just criticising the doctors who are working there. The doctors are frustrated with the situation.” He also alleged there were severe lapses in the health administration at the camps. The fuel bill for ambulances had not been paid and the petrol station had refused to extend any more fuel, so only one of the three ambulances was operating. Doctors working in the camps were not being paid overtime and had no proper lodging facilities although the GMOA had raised the issue many times.

Vavuniya health director Dr M. Mahendran told the newspaper that the monies allocated for the district’s health budget had been exhausted. He had no funds for other things such as fuel for ambulances.

Last Thursday, the Colombo government announced the further scaling down of operations of all international relief agencies, including the Red Cross. Human Rights and Disaster Management Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe claimed that the decision was taken because the war was over.

In fact, the government is seeking to restrict information filtering out about the terrible conditions in the camps, and to prevent witnesses giving accounts of the army’s shelling of civilians during the final phase of the war. Unpublished UN reports indicated that 7,000 civilians were killed because of the bombardment from January to the first week of May alone.

Following the government’s latest directive, the Red Cross closed two offices in the east. One in Trincomalee was providing medical care for 13,000 injured people evacuated by sea from northern Mullaithivu in the last months of the war. The other office in Batticaloa provided “protection services” to people facing death threats by military-backed

paramilitary forces.

The government has blatantly defended the conditions in the camps and denied any responsibility for health problems. In an interview with the Indian-based *Hindu* last week President Rajapakse declared: “I would say the conditions in our camps are the best any country has. We supply water. There is a problem with lavatories. That is not because of our fault.” Rajapakse claimed that the funds for sanitation were supplied by the European Union and were paid to the UN and non-government organisations that were “very slow” in disbursing money.

Rajapakse insisted that “security concerns,” including the mining of areas by the LTTE, made it impossible for the refugees to be freed immediately. He added that the “shortcomings” in the camps would be overcome “slowly”. His remarks are another indication that the government has no intention of keeping its promise to resettle the detainees within 180 days.

Alongside the indefinite mass detentions, which violate the most basic democratic rights as well as the country’s constitution, the government has tightened the military’s control over the Northern Province by appointing the army chief of staff, Major General G. A. Chandrasiri as the provincial governor.



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