

Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka: “Almost living in hell”

Our correspondents
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The Sri Lankan government has underscored its determination to keep 280,000 Tamil civilians in internment camps indefinitely, in blatant violation of their basic democratic rights.

UN Under-Secretary, Lynn Pascoe arrived in Sri Lanka last week for further talks on resettling detainees. Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse told him his government had a target of resettling 70 percent of the people within 180 days. But he added that this target would depend on the de-mining of the former war zone in the island’s north.

As if to show that this time frame was not serious, Rajapakse said Croatia had been carrying out de-mining for 16 years and was still not finished. His message was unmistakable: the government has no plans to resettle detained civilians for the foreseeable future.

Four months have now passed since the last Tamil civilians were detained after fleeing from the attacks of the Sri Lankan military in its offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It has been obvious from the start that these so-called displaced persons’ camps are nothing but giant prisons fenced with razor wire and guarded by armed soldiers.

Hundred of thousands of civilians have been herded into several dozen squalid camps around the northern town of Vavuniya, including 160,000 in four huge centres at Manik Farm, near Chettikulam. All of the detainees—men, women and children—are treated as potential LTTE “terrorists”, underscoring the communal character of the government’s anti-Tamil war.

While the UN has feigned concern for the detainees, it has funded the detention camps to the tune of \$US188 million over the past three months. This funding has given de facto support for the clear violation of Sri Lankan and international law involved in the mass detention of Tamils.

The Rajapakse government has banned independent local and international media and aid agencies from the camps. It is intent

on both hiding the conditions in the camps and preventing survivors of the northern war zone from speaking out about the army’s war crimes during the final months of the conflict.

We publish below a report filed by a WSWs team that visited some of the Vavuniya camps recently.

We arrived in Vavuniya, where many of the detention camps are located, two months after our last visit. The government’s propaganda that the situation in the camps has improved is false.

The military maintains checkpoints to rigorously screen visitors to the town and camps, and troops conduct heavy patrolling. Everyone who comes to Vavuniya by train or bus has to register with the police, explain the reason for their visit and supply the address of their place of stay. On leaving Vavuniya, the same process applies.

The day we visited, the whole town was heavily guarded by the army and the Special Task Force (police commandos). The bus stand was completely cleared. We discovered later that there was much propaganda about “releasing” 10,000 refugees to their home areas. We saw several dozen buses parked around the Manik Farm camps to take refugees.

However, later reports revealed that at least half of the refugees had been detained in other camps in their home districts. M. Shivanandan, 49, told Reuters on September 17: “I’m disappointed to have left Vavuniya thinking that we could go home”. He was being detained at a school in eastern Trincomalee, where 320 civilians were held under army guard.

Human Rights and Disaster Management Minister, Mahinda Samarasinghe admitted that people were being held in so-called transit camps. Without confirming when they would be released, Samarasinghe told Reuters they would be sent home “in a few days or weeks”. This charade took place in the lead up to the visit by UN Under-Secretary Lynn Pascoe to Sri

Lanka.

Inside the camps, security has been tightened. One of the four Manik Farm camps has been divided into 15 small zones, each holding about 2,750 people. This division has been carried out, not to provide more facilities for inmates, but to monitor them more tightly, with increased military guarding. Government officials had expressed concern that large camps were difficult to control.

Last time we visited we saw long queues of several hundred people every day waiting to see their relatives in the camps. But because of harassment and intimidation by the security forces and the heavy expense of making the journey, only a few people are now arriving to see their relatives.

Earlier, relatives had to talk to prisoners by standing face-to-face, divided by a barbed-wire fence. Now five feet wide barbed-wire fences have been erected to further separate visitors and inmates. People separated by five feet have to shout to speak to each other, and no one can hear clearly. And because there are fewer crowds, soldiers are watching visitors everywhere, preventing anyone having a private conversation.

The conditions inside the camp are terrible. One recently released old man from the Manik camp told us: “Life inside the camp is almost living in hell. We faced a lot of problems after we left the LTTE-controlled areas. We were without food for several days. When asked for water, we were scolded in filthy language.

“Finally, packed like animals, we were brought here. Initially, food parcels were thrown from vehicles. Whoever got them ate, and others had to starve. Several elderly people with me died of starvation during the early days.

“The government is talking about improvements but that is just propaganda. When higher international officials come to the camps, the military arranges a good show for them. Many young men and girls have been taken from the camp and nobody knows what has happened to them.

“Sanitation is a big problem. During the past four months I took a bath only four times. All the toilets are almost full. People are suffering with infectious diseases and some have died. The government is trying to kill with disease the people who escaped their guns, and claim it is just a natural disaster. Diarrhoea, viral fever and skin diseases are very common. Children and babies don’t get milk-based foods. We always get the same routine meal—the very cheapest vegetables and rice.”

Komarasankulam camp is set up at a government school near Vavuniya. There are 2,400 people detained there, including 600

children. Visitors meet detainees in a shed guarded by several soldiers.

When we approached one police officer at around 7 a.m., he said visits were not possible because there was a “water problem” and asked us to come two hours later. Over 500 people were waiting in a long queue with plastic cans to collect water from the only tube well for the entire camp. Refugees told us they started waiting as early as 2 a.m. to collect water.

Only 45 temporarily toilets covered with polythene have been provided for the 2,400 detainees. Most of them are filled and cannot be used. The stench is all around.

There is only one doctor for the entire camp. He comes for just two hours a day. One person told us that several people had died from fever and diarrhoea. Only very seriously-ill patients are taken to Vavuniya hospital.

Because of the government’s propaganda about releasing people to relatives, many families have submitted applications. But only elderly people over 60 have been released. It is a lengthy procedure, with applications having to pass through several administrative divisions. However, the final decisions are taken by the area military commander.

Officers in the camps have informed people that even if they were to be released, no one would be allowed to resettle in Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu in the Vanni region, areas that were captured by the military in the final stages of the war.

The military has recently cleared a jungle area to set up a camp at Murasomottai in the eastern Trincomalee district, where about 2,300 refugees are detained. This is one of the so-called transit camps.

One inmate said: “We are liberated, the government boasts! But we are detained here in a jungle. During rainy days we have to stand, as there is water on the floor. Visitors are only allowed to talk for 15 minutes, then they are chased away. Snake bites are common in this camp. My 27-year-old daughter lost both her legs in Kilinochchi. I have lost my wife. This is an intolerable situation.”



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