

Former detainee describes conditions in Sri Lankan internment camps

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Since May about 280,000 Tamil civilians have been detained in internment camps established by the Rajapakse government in northern Sri Lanka following its military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). After enduring indiscriminate bombing and shelling by the Sri Lankan military, the Tamil refugees are being held in squalid detention camps in violation of their basic democratic rights.

The following interview is with a young girl who was interned in one of the Manik Farm camps near Vavuniya where about 160,000 people are held. When the Sri Lankan military began its northern offensive she was living with her parents at a village near Kilinochchi. Early this year the family fled to one of last areas held by LTTE in Mullaithivu district. We are withholding her name for obvious security reasons.

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“We were displaced from our village to several other places before arriving in Putumattalan. In Kilinochchi we stayed with friends. Each time we erected a tent and dug a bunker and stayed inside it. I have two sisters—one seven years old and the other five. My parents staked their lives caring for us during this time and took the risk of cooking meals for us outside the bunker while we were inside.

“When we were at Tharmapuram, near Kilinochchi, I went to school for a few days but the school was shelled. The hospital near the school was also damaged by bomb attacks and patients were injured and killed. These places were always crowded and whenever there was a shell attack lots of people would always get hit. I saw many injured people being evacuated by push

bicycles and other vehicles after shell attacks or bombing.

“The army announced ‘no-fire zones’ and massive crowds of people flocked to these areas. One such place was Thevipuram in Puthukkudiyiruppu, but the army also shelled this area. People wanted to know why the army was attacking this ‘no-fire zone’.

“At Putumattalan [the last army-designated no-fire zone] we could not leave our bunkers and faced frequent artillery shells fired by the army. It was like a shower of bombs and if you came out of the bunker you might be killed. Our ears were always filled with stories of the people who died in those attacks.”

On March 20 in Putumattalan, the girl was seized from her family by the LTTE. Her mother pleaded with the LTTE but to no avail. She later discovered that her mother was killed ten days later during an army bombardment. Her father was also killed by shells on May 10 as he was desperately looking for his daughter.

“I was forcibly taken by the LTTE and that was the last time I saw my parents. While in LTTE custody I repeatedly pleaded with them to let me see my parents just once but they mercilessly refused. However, I was able to escape from LTTE control with the help of one of my relatives.

“Once out of LTTE custody I tried three times to get out of the area and finally managed to escape with some other people through Nandikadal. On our way, the Tigers [the LTTE] blocked the fleeing people and chased and beat them. They even shot at us. People injured in those attacks urged us to save them but

nobody was able to help them. We were staying on the seashore in the dark and at dawn I saw dead bodies by my side. This is how many people would have lost their lives, I thought.”

The young girl eventually entered a Sri Lankan military-controlled area on May 20 with tens of thousands of other refugees. She was questioned by the army and because of her size was put with other children.

She was first detained at the Ramanathan centre in Manik Farm, explaining that her experiences in the detention camp and the LTTE-controlled area were equally traumatic. “My sisters and I were living separately with relatives in the Ramanathan camp but my sisters were later transferred to another camp. I didn’t see my sisters again until my release.”

“The place was surrounded with barbed wire and guarded by security forces. A tent of about 20 square metres was divided into two sections and eight people told to stay in each section. We were unable to leave to fulfill our needs. It didn’t matter if you had a serious disease, patients were not allowed to get treatment at outside hospitals.

“Those wanting to get attention at the camp’s dispensary had to wait in long queues. In order to see a doctor you had to wait to get a number the previous day. During this period the situation facing patients could become critical.

“We had to follow strict regulations to get a patient admitted to an outside hospital in Vavuniya or Mannar. First, we had to bring the patient to the camp hospital and get a recommendation from the doctor there, and then get police permission. So the patient might be dead before he was admitted to hospital.

“My cousin’s seven-year-old sister was suffering from septicemia but the police delayed her permit to go to Vavuniya hospital and she died. They even refused to allow us to cremate her body at the camp. I’ve heard of many of these sorts of deaths at the camp.”

The girl said that water and toilet facilities at the

camp were grossly inadequate. “We had to wait in long lines to get water from the tube wells and long queues for the toilets as well. Each person was only allowed five litres of water a day for bathing and other essential needs, such as cooking and washing. There were about 10,000 inmates in Zone Five (one section of the Ramanathan camp) but when I was there there were only two tube wells.

“People were not given enough food and much of it was half-cooked and not edible. But because there was no alternative, the inmates were forced to eat whatever they could get. There are many illnesses in the camps caused by the bad condition of the meals.”

Sri Lankan security forces frequently harassed young people in the camps, she said.

“Youth are frequently questioned by the security intelligence forces—both the police and the military. If the girls complained about the army’s misbehaviour they were taken out and you’d find them killed or disappeared. In the Zone Five, where I stayed, I saw the bodies of a brother and a sister from the same family. People said that the army was responsible for those deaths.”



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