

A grim journey through Sri Lanka's war zone

Our correspondent
28 November 2009

The full scale of the destruction caused to the northern Vanni area in Sri Lanka by the Rajapakse government's military offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is still not known to the outside world, even though the war ended after the defeat of the LTTE more than six months ago.

A vast area from Mannar on the northwestern coast through Kilinochchi to the Mullaitivu district on the eastern coast was depopulated and properties were destroyed in the military offensive. Thousands of Tamil civilians were killed and tens of thousands maimed in the indiscriminate bombing and shelling. More than 250,000 people fled to government-controlled areas, only to be detained under squalid conditions in huge camps near Vavuniya and elsewhere.

The military recently allowed limited passenger transport from Jaffna to the south via the A9 road that passes through the Vanni. A WSWS reporter took the trip in order to test the government's claims of "free movement" and provide a glimpse of the destruction caused by the war.

I travelled from Jaffna to Colombo one day after Major General G. A. Chandrasiri, the governor of Northern Province, declared on November 18 that "the government has decided to remove all obstacles that restrict the free movement of civilians from Jaffna to Colombo." My journey proved the bogus character of the government's claim, and revealed the harassment being experienced by Tamils.

Previously, everyone had to obtain a security clearance from the office of the Jaffna Commander to travel to Colombo or any other part of the south. Applicants had to cite reasons for travelling and give the addresses where they were going to stay at their destinations. Permission was at the sole discretion of the commander's office. Despite General Chandrasiri's announcement of the removal of this restriction, travelling from the Jaffna Peninsula, which is

under tight military occupation, is not as free as the government boasted. All Tamils are treated as suspicious.

Even after the so-called removal of "all obstacles", people must bring photocopies of their national identity card or passport to obtain seat reservations for the bus service. Seat reservations cost 50 rupees for Colombo and 10 rupees for Vavuniya. The ticket charge for Vavuniya is 200 rupees, and for Colombo 600 rupees. Luxury bus tickets cost 2,000 rupees (\$US17.50).

The day before I travelled, I joined hundreds of people waiting in queues from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. until the office opened at the Jaffna central bus depot. Any passengers, including old people, who produced identity cards with an address in Kilinochchi, the former LTTE stronghold, were denied permission. Those without identity cards were also turned back.

The next day, at 5.30 a.m., we queued for buses near the railway station, which was destroyed in the war. Passengers were separated into 200-metre queues, according to where they were going. At about 9 a.m. we were loaded onto a Vavuniya bus. Everyone gave a sigh of relief, thinking we were now leaving for Vavuniya.

But the bus stopped at the hospital road in Jaffna town for about half an hour until the military finished checking the buses and people. This large checkpoint was surrounded by barbed wire and under heavy army guard.

When our turn came, we walked through a narrow line between iron pipes to the checkpoint. There were separate queues for males and females. First our bags were thoroughly checked. Then one soldier checked the identity cards and photocopies while another rubberstamped the photocopies. Two police officers were there to register our names and the addresses where we were staying.

The soldiers took one photocopy of the identity card, giving us one copy. After that we were loaded back onto the bus, but had to wait more than two hours inside the bus until the army completed checking other passengers.

Twelve buses were waiting to start the journey. Despite the seat reservations, additional passengers were loaded onto Vavuniya-bound buses. They had to travel the 142 kilometres from Jaffna to Vavuniya standing up. The 12 buses drove in convoy, with two soldiers on each bus watching the passengers.

The signs of the war can be seen from Eluthumattuval, about 25 kilometres south of Jaffna. Places like Eluthumattuval, Muhamalai and Pallai were famous for coconut growing but vast areas of coconut cultivation were burned or ruined. There were large craters due to Sri Lankan air force bombing.

The A9 road goes through Muhamalai, Pallai, and Iyakkachchi on the Jaffna Peninsula, followed by Paranthan, Kilinochchi, Iranaimadu, Thirumuruhandi, Mankulam, Kanagarayan Kulam and Pulilyankulam before reaching Vavuniya. These towns, except Vavuniya, were under LTTE control. All have been fully destroyed. They were like ghost towns. I could see houses, shops and government buildings levelled to the ground on each side of the road. A big water tank erected on a 25-metre tower at Kilinochchi was severely damaged, as was the Kilinochchi government hospital.

There were lots of burned and damaged vehicles. Any houses, schools and public buildings that were not damaged had been turned into military camps.

Along the road, two heavily-armed soldiers were stationed at 100-metre intervals. At about every 500 metres, there were mini-camps located with groups of soldiers. No signs of human habitation could be seen except for the military presence. There was no vehicle movement apart from some army vehicles.

Hindu temples were still damaged but Buddhist statues and shrines had been erected at the main town junctions. Hinduism is the main religion among Tamils, while Buddhism is prevalent among the Sinhalese. The erection of Buddha statues is a sign that the military and government is seeking to foment new religious-communal tensions in this predominantly Tamil area.

In Kilinochchi, a vast land area was fenced off with barbed

wire for army use. We could not see what was happening inside, but one could imagine that a massive security network is being built in this area for a permanent military presence. The government will send Tamil civilians now detained in Vavuniya and other camps into a vastly strengthened military occupation.

The buses continued along bumpy roads without stopping anywhere in the devastated war zone, until we reached Mankulam, more than 100 kilometres from Jaffna. There we had a 10-minute tea break. Many among the nearly 600 passengers on the 12 buses had no time for a cup of tea within the 10 minutes.

The buses reached Vavuniya at 4 p.m. after travelling more than four hours. From there we still had to travel another 250 kilometres to reach Colombo. Another major checkpoint was located at Medawachchiya, south of Vavuniya. There we experienced the same checking and registration as in Jaffna. (If you take the train from Vavuniya to Colombo you face similar checking near the railway station.)

Tamils coming from the north to Colombo must still register at police stations near where they are residing. Near the railway station at Wellawatte, a Colombo suburb, we heard police threatening people coming from the north with arrest and prosecution if they did not register.

By removing certain travel restrictions, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is desperately seeking to deflect anger among Tamils. Rajapakse has called an early presidential election to strengthen his hand amid a deepening economic and political crisis. Despite government's posturing, however, its communal harassment of the country's Tamil minority is continuing.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact