

Sri Lanka: Thousands of Tamils still in detention camps

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Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians, who fled the fighting in the final days of the military's offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), remain in squalid detention camps in northern Sri Lanka. The official total is 106,000, with around 80,000 people still in the Manik Farm camps near the town of Vavuniya.

After the LTTE's defeat last May, the army rounded up 280,000 men, women and children and put them in detention centres surrounded by barbed wire and armed soldiers. No one was permitted to leave. Visitors were heavily vetted. Thousands of young men and women were interrogated by police and military intelligence officers, and incarcerated in other, undisclosed centres as "LTTE suspects".

Last October, in the lead-up to the presidential election, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government eased the regime at the camps and promised that all detainees would be resettled by January 31. On December 1, inmates who had homes to return to, or relatives to stay with, were finally permitted to leave after being vetted by the security forces.

However, many refugees have no places to go. In the final months of fighting, the military laid waste to towns and villages throughout the LTTE-held territory in a ruthless war of attrition. Thousands of civilians were killed. Many who managed to escape arrived at Manik Farm and other detention centres, emaciated, injured or ill.

According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 160,000 people have returned to their district of origin. However, these are government figures, which must be treated with caution. Most people have not been returned to their own villages and towns. Those who have are struggling to survive with little or no government assistance. Even according to official figures, 29,060 people are staying with "host families" or relatives. They have no income and are subjected to stringent travel restrictions and police reporting

requirements.

Resettlement minister Rishard Bathiudeen has repeated the lame excuse that delays in de-mining the former war zones have "impeded the resettlement process". His secretary, U.L.M. Halaldeen, has issued what amounts to another phony promise—for the April 8 general election. "Come April, they all will be resettled by the time of the parliamentary election," he said.

WSWS reporters recently visited the Manik Farm "welfare village" and filed the report below.

The Colombo government claims that after the "resettlement" of some Tamil refugees the situation in the Vavuniya detention camps has improved. We visited the Manik Farm camp, located 30 kilometres west of Vavuniya on the Mannar road. The situation there for detainees is worsening, again exposing President Rajapakse's lies.

As we travelled to Cheddikulam where the Manik Farm camps are situated, we could see a number of dilapidated government buildings that are now being used to hold "LTTE suspects". These prisons are surrounded by high walls and barbed wire fences and guarded by soldiers. The inmates are mainly young men and women who were interrogated and dragged away for "re-education". No one is allowed to visit these camps.

People at Manik Farm are still living in the small tents put up last May. These tents are now in a decrepit condition. While people can now move in and out the camps are still guarded by soldiers and surrounded by barbed wire. Anger, resentment and weariness are evident in the faces of people who have now been incarcerated for eight months without adequate food, medical care and sanitary facilities.

There has been no let up in the seizing of youth as LTTE suspects. We were told that military intelligence personnel come night and day to haul people away.

The government claims that people have been given freedom of movement. But this is false. Those who want to leave have to apply and their release is by no means guaranteed.

For short-term releases, an application form must be filled out at the camp's military office. A family member has to vouch for the outgoing person by signing the application form. Those given "freedom of movement" have to return on the same day. If they fail, the family member is taken into custody.

The regime for visitors is also prison-like. Visitors have to register with police at the entrance to the camp. They can only enter after a body search and are then confined to the visitors' area. No cameras or cell phones are allowed. Visitors cannot come closer than a metre or so to the inmates and often have to speak loudly to communicate. Soldiers monitor what is being said and also the limited amount of time allocated.

Food is limited. The weekly ration is just a kilogram each of rice, flour and sugar and 100 grams of lentils or dhal per person. People have no money to buy other essentials. They do not get fish, meat, egg or vegetables. The rations are obviously inadequate and many children and adults are suffering from malnutrition.

Water is also scarce. Each inmate receives five litres of drinking water per week. Tube wells have been sunk to use for bathing and washing, but the water is very salty. To ease the water shortages, the military management in charge of the camp has brought muddy water from a nearby dam. However, people have refused to use that water.

We saw dozens of people going in and out of the camps after obtaining permission. Many of these people leave to try to sell their meagre possessions and even relief items to obtain money for other things. The government has made these innocent people completely destitute.

Health services in the camp have deteriorated. Last month the Colombo government washed its hands of providing health care, passing the responsibility to the provincial government. However, provincial health services lack adequate funds and are crumbling. Doctors assigned to the camps only attend for two to three hours a day.

Thousands of young children have been deprived of education. About 2,500 school children have been allowed to attend schools in Vavuniya. However, there are no facilities or teachers. The students sit under the trees until the end of the school day and return to the camps.

During the election campaign, Rajapakse visited one of the camps and feigned anger at the conditions facing the inmates. He promised to complete the resettlement process. State-owned TV stations broadcast footage of Rajapakse giving "advice" to military personnel to provide "facilities" for the refugees. It was all for show. Nothing has happened since.

Such is the anger among the refugees that very few wanted to vote—either for Rajapakse or opposition candidate Sarath Fonseka, the general who ruthlessly prosecuted the war against the LTTE. As is clear from the above, the situation inside the camps makes it very difficult for people to speak openly to visitors. But we got a glimpse of the sentiment from one person who told us:

"Those people who wanted to exercise their voting rights were not given a chance. Some people were able to go and vote in the morning. But in the afternoon, the army and police told the people they would not be allowed to leave because they could vote for Fonseka.

"Many people want to oust this government somehow because of its crime against us. But why should one vote for any of them? Rajapakse and Fonseka were together when they ordered the military to shower us with bombs."



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