

# WSWS reporters visit the devastated Sri Lankan town of Kilinochchi

Our correspondents

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*One year after the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan government claims that life is returning to normal in the war-ravaged Vanni region. But as our reporting team found during their recent visit to Kilinochchi, that is far from the case. Tens of thousands of civilians who lost everything during the fighting have been “resettled” in the area with little government assistance.*

*Kilinochchi was the LTTE’s administrative headquarters when its forces controlled most of the Vanni. It was the scene of months of bitter fighting in the final months of 2008 as the LTTE put up stiff resistance to repeated army offensives and sustained aerial and artillery bombardment. The entire civilian population had fled well before Sri Lankan troops finally entered what was a ghost town in early January 2009.*

*After the fall of Kilinochchi, the LTTE’s resistance rapidly collapsed. The army tightened its noose around the LTTE and confined it to a small pocket of land on the northeast coast, which was pounded relentlessly killing thousands of civilians. When the area was finally overrun in May 2009, the army rounded up more than a quarter of a million civilians, many of whom were injured, sick and famished, and herded them into detention camps.*

*The internees were only released from last December onwards in response to international and domestic pressure. In the meantime, the military had turned Kilinochchi into an army town with plans for a permanent occupation and the construction of major permanent bases. Former residents found the town devastated and have been forced to eke out an existence as best they can.*

*Our reporters visited Kilinochchi town and the villages of Poonahari, 26 kilometres to the west, and Vattakachchi, 15 kilometres to the east. They conducted their work under difficult circumstances, as the media generally cannot operate freely in the town. The photos*

*are taken from a bus, but give an indication of the makeshift conditions under which people are living in the Vanni.*

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The first thing that strikes you about the situation in Kilinochchi is that you find more soldiers than civilians in the town. They are in uniform and civvies, carrying weapons or just moving here and there. People can only travel to Kilinochchi, either from Jaffna to the north or from Vavuniya to the south, by passing through military camps, checkpoints and patrolling soldiers.

Soldiers might not question you as they would have six months ago but they keep a close eye on everyone’s movements. Just after one of our correspondents went to a relative’s house in a village, soldiers arrived at the house and asked why he was there. When he said he was visiting a relative, they went away. But the same thing happens whenever a new person comes to a house.

The buildings in Kilinochchi town were destroyed last year. Heaps of debris have since been removed about 50 metres from the main road. The traders who have returned are renovating or rebuilding their shops, which were damaged during the war, at their own expense. These are small shops and there are only a few customers. Most of the eating houses are run by the army, catering for people travelling through the town.

People’s land and buildings that were previously occupied by the LTTE are now occupied by the military. A vast area in the southern section of the town has been fenced with barbed wire. Residents think it will be used to erect a military complex. Meanwhile, the Kilinochchi bus stand still has no any shelter. Passengers must wait for buses, sometimes for hours, under trees in the hot sun or rain. No buses are running to some places still.

Former detainees have been sent here almost without any assistance. The government's attitude is one expression of its communal discrimination. Displaced people spoke angrily about the government's policy. One person explained: "We are living here abandoned by all. The government said it would provide us with houses, employment and other facilities. It has not even given us clean drinking water, apart from what the relief agencies have supplied. Nobody has come to see our plight. There is no difference between staying in the detention camps and living here. The conditions are the same in both places."

Many of the resettled people live in 10-by-10 feet huts with tin sheets provided by some non-government organisations. Other people are living in tents that are the same size. There are no separate rooms for sleeping or getting dressed. The floors have been leveled with mud. As there are no toilet facilities, people are using open spaces. Some families have used tin sheets to make roofs for their damaged houses.

People have been able to survive without going hungry only because the World Food Program (WFP) is providing food. Many people don't have even instruments like knives, equipment to clean their hands, or lamps for daily use. They have to look for bottles to make kerosene oil lamps, and search for water because the wells are not cleaned.

The Kilinochchi district was famous for agriculture and fishing. The large Iranaimadu tank (artificial lake) mainly supplied irrigation for several thousand acres of agricultural land. The tank is now under the military's control. Water has not yet been fully released for farmers. A few farmers have begun cultivation but they do not have tractors or other basic equipment. Many do not have even a mamoty (a type of spade). Fishermen are not allowed to fish in the tank.

Poonahari village has been devastated, like other areas in the Vanni. The debris from destroyed houses, such as bricks and wood, has been used to erect military checkpoints that monitor the local coastline. One resident commented: "The military checkpoints are made out of the wood and sheets from our homes."

Students are generally attending schools but there is a

serious lack of teachers and equipment. Teachers have to travel a long distance from Jaffna or Vavuniya. At Poonahari, the Vikneswara School, which previously conducted classes up to the advanced level, is now occupied by the military, so students must walk to another school five kilometres away.

The military has also occupied Poonahari's government hospital. As there are no longer any hospital facilities, people have to beg someone in the army camps to take any seriously ill patients to Kilinochchi in a military vehicle for treatment. Patients with minor illnesses simply have to suffer.

In Vattakachchi village there is no hospital and no school, and the people live in tents. The houses were destroyed during the war. The local Vattakachchi and Ramanathapuram schools remain occupied by the military.

Many women have lost their husbands. They are struggling to survive, facing numerous difficulties, without proper clothes and education for their children. One woman explained: "The government did not give us any help. I don't have the money to search for my disappeared husband. Others like me face the same problems."

Billions of rupees are urgently needed to rebuild the Kilinochchi district for proper human habitation. But the Colombo government is not interested in rebuilding the conditions of ordinary people. Its treatment of war-devastated people is a continuation of decades of discrimination against Tamils.



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