ICG reports detail the militarisation in Sri Lanka's North

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The Brussels-based think tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), released two reports on March 16—*Sri Lanka's North 1: The Denial Of Minority Rights*, and *Sri Lanka's North II Rebuilding Under The Military*—that expose the extent of the permanent military occupation of the country's Northern Province after the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009.

The reports indirectly expose many of the false claims made by President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government that it has resettled displaced persons, rebuilt infrastructure, rehabilitated "LTTE suspects", and established democracy in the province after a quarter century of civil war.

The ICG reports provide a valuable insight into what is an entrenched military occupation. The first report detailed the military's control over the civil administration and the continuing pattern of "enforced disappearances" and "extrajudicial punishments." It also documents the systematic attempt to establish Sinhala colonies in the north.

The second report deals with the military's increasing economic role, including the "controlling [of] land." The report also reveals the extreme poverty of much of the largely Tamil population and the continuing distress faced by those who have been resettled.

According to the ICG, the living conditions for the resettled remain "extremely difficult, with virtually none of the needed infrastructure—houses, transport, electricity, schools, hospitals, or job or livelihood opportunities—in place."

Many people have not been resettled in areas where they previously lived, as the military controls large blocks of land and runs the resettlement process. A government official told the ICG that in a meeting at a refugee camp, displaced people had warned to return to their villages, but the army declared that "not an option." The military participate in meetings held by civilian authorities and "force acceptance of decisions made in advance."

The army has established a network of camps, including large cantonments with houses for soldiers and their families. This "has required the displacement of numerous families from their houses and lands," the ICG stated. The camps are in addition to long-standing high security zones in Jaffna that have left "some 36,000 still displaced."

In some cases, displaced families were forced to live "in tents, huts and damaged structures, while seeing their well-built houses across the fence being used by military." The military's takeover of these properties has no legal basis.

The military's involvement in economic activities includes agriculture, trading and construction, and is having a devastating impact on small businesses and farmers.

The people who have been resettled have had to re-build their lives with little or no assistance. The result is "extremely high rates of poverty and food insecurity" across the province, with more than half of the population living below poverty line. Food insecurity is estimated to be 60 percent and 15 percent face "severe" insecurity.

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The government and military are engaged in a reactionary policy of "Sinhalisation." The ICG stated that this ranges "from changing the names of streets and villages from Tamil to Sinhala and the building of Buddha statues to the movement of large enough numbers of Sinhalese to the north to change the population balance in politically and socially significant ways." The report warned that this communal policy was "generating new tensions and increasing the risks of future instability."

The "Sinhalisation" of the north is the product of more than 60 years of anti-Tamil discrimination that has been exploited by successive Colombo governments to divide working people and to buttress bourgeois rule, and led to open civil war in 1983.

In the Vanni region, which was previously largely under LTTE control, the military has established an extensive presence and a vast repressive apparatus. The ICG revealed that numerous intelligence agencies operating in Vanni have recruited as informers some of those held in their custody as "LTTE suspects."

The ICG report explained: "In the Vanni, it is still not possible to have a meeting of four or more people without the permission—and often the attendance—of local military officials." An aid worker explained that away from the main highway some interior areas are so heavily controlled by the military that they are still not accessible even to humanitarian agencies.

In the Vanni, local Tamils have been largely excluded from important administrative posts. A presidential task force appointed in May 2009 that consists of top defence and government bureaucrats rule over the region. Civilian bodies consisting mostly of Tamils are denied any authority. The military immediately brands any opposition as supportive of the LTTE and "terrorism."

The ICG painted a devastating picture of the impact of the war, stating that "war- and trauma-related mental health conditions are very high in the north." A survey found that in the Vanni, "76.9 percent [of respondents] had been 'caught in crossfire of an attack or battle', 60.9 percent had been shot at by a gun, and 32.7 percent had been injured by a 'knife, gun or other weapon'."

The incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder was 13 percent, while 41.8 percent suffered from depression and 48.5 percent from anxiety. Despite this obvious widespread distress, "programs designed to address war-related trauma and other psycho-social stresses were strictly prohibited" for the first two years after the war ended. Limited programs have only been allowed since mid-2011.

The ICG noted that certain infrastructure projects have been rapidly developed, but "there has been little benefit" for working people. The government is seeking to transform the area into a new cheap labour platform for foreign and Sri Lankan investors, and the military promotes the interests of businessmen from the south over locals.

The ICG reports expose some of the activities of the government and the military since the end of the war. But their recommendations are limited to appeals to governments and donors such as World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to provide assistance and to pressure the Colombo government to "establish a level-playing field" in the north.

As far as the government is concerned, however, the purpose of the war was to ensure the continued political and economic dominance of the Sinhala elites at the expense of their Tamil counterparts and working people as a whole.

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