

# Discussion Paper-I

## Internally Displaced People in Sri Lanka

For those who are wondering what ever happened to the people who lived in side the Vanni here is some information on where they are and how they live. This is not a status update but a presentation of the facts compiled from various sources. The names, places and sources of the information have been concealed in order to protect the identity of the people. The information contained in the article are factual. However, the data is as per the beginning of June and may have undergone changes without notice.

### Introduction

The Rajapakse government was determined to fight it out with the LTTE as soon as it came to power in November 2005. The Cease Fire Agreements that was signed in February 2002 was falling apart. Both parties to the agreement; the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) could not see eye to eye on the issues of peace after the third round of peace talks. The agreements reached in the peace talks mostly remained on paper. With the cease fire was in place there was a proxy war that was steadily progressing. It could be called as a shadow war as paramilitary groups on both the sides carried out random killings.

The onslaught of the Sri Lankan army started whole heartedly in January 2008 with the abrogation of the cease fire agreement. By now both the SLA and the LTTE had built their arsenals and were ready for war.

Starting from the Eastern parts of Sri Lanka the LTTE was slowly being flushed from the area. Once the Eastern part was cleared of the LTTE the GOSL set its eyes on the north, the LTTE stronghold. For over a year there has been intense fighting in the northern parts of Sri Lanka pushing the LTTE to the brink of defeat.

### Background

Kilinochchi, the capital of the LTTE, which was considered unwinnable fell to the army in early January 2009. With this hundreds of thousands of people retreated to the jungles. Reports from the media claim that the people moved alongside the LTTE in search of protection. There are other reports that claim that the LTTE held the people as hostages and used them as a protection cover against the army's attack.

The progressing army pushed the LTTE and the civilians to a small strip of land in the north eastern part of the country. At this point the army claimed that there were about 70,000 people in the LTTE controlled areas. Other unverifiable, but reliable sources said that there were about 300,000 people trapped.

There seemed to be a severe shortage of food, water and medicines. People had now walked for many days without food and were taking cover under the trees. The rains and the aerial bombs continue to pour down. There is still no exact account of how many were killed.

The army in the meantime announced a no fire zone. It was a safety passage that was given to the civilians to get out of the fighting. As soon as this was announced, contrary to the expectation of Government very few came out. Previously when the GOSL had provided a safe passage some people came out. They were kept in camps and were interrogated continuously and were denied freedom of movement. This was because almost all the civilians left in the Vanni were trained by the LTTE. The government wanted to arrest/interrogate those who were trained. Secondly, they had members of their family in the LTTE. They had been conscripted. So the army wanted to get the people who had any connection with the LTTE.

One side of the story is that people inside the Vanni heard about the news of the treatment of those who fled the war zone and refused to seek safety. They feared that the same treatment would be meted out to them. While the other side of the story is that the LTTE was holding the hostage by not letting them go. They were being used as human shields. Some people claimed that those who decided to leave were shot below the knee.

The fighting peaked with unthinkable amounts of destruction and death. Yet the people kept taking shelter under the LTTE. While the LTTE was campaigning for mass support all over the world, the Army was justifying its war on terror. Both the parties refused to give up the fight.

Some people who came from the area had reported that the LTTE would launch a rocket from behind the civilian lines and the Army would pound that area with aerial bombs. Then the appeals for peace continued.

While the army called for an unconditional laying down of arms, the LTTE called for a cease fire. But it seemed that they were determined to fight till the finish.

By now the army had breached the LTTE lines in a place called Puthukudirippu (translated as new colony or new settlement). This opened the human barrage. About 150,000 people crossed over to the government controlled areas seeking safety. They were screened for membership of the LTTE. If found so they would be sent to prison. If the person is not found guilty they were left in the camps.

The number of people who had come out of the war zone proved the government wrong. The government was consistently saying that there were not more than 70,000 people left in the area. Double the number had

come out. At that point there were about 200,000 people who come out including those were in the hospital seeking treatment.

### **The Current Situation**

At the moment the people who fled the war zone are kept in three districts; Kalimoddai camp in Mannar district, Pulmoddai in Trincomalee District and the majority of them are in Vavuniya District. Though relief is distributed in all the camps Vavuniya is the scene of most of the action.

There are 22 camps in Vavuniya. 16 schools and 6 open areas with a total population of 2,57,760 people. The camps are divided into four zones; Anandakumaraswamy housing a total of 45758 people, plus a model village in the same zone called Kadirgramam housing 18,948 people, This was set up to look like a model village. Zone 2 is called Ramanathan with a population of 73,306. Zone 4 called Arunachalam consisting of 42,944 people and Zone 4 (yet to be named) has 40721 people. The total camp population 221717 this does not include people in the hospitals, detention centers and some of those who have left the camps to live with their relatives.

#### **Age Wise Population<sup>1</sup>**

| No | Age Group    | Male          | Female        | Total         |
|----|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1  | 0 to 6       | 1587          | 1651          | 3238          |
| 2  | 6 to 1       | 2984          | 3106          | 6900          |
| 3  | 1 to 3       | 5880          | 6119          | 11999         |
| 4  | 3 to 5       | 5187          | 5399          | 10586         |
| 5  | 5 to 10      | 14129         | 14703         | 28832         |
| 6  | 10- 18       | 22927         | 23863         | 46790         |
| 7  | 18-60        | 65533         | 68208         | 133741        |
| 8  | 60-65        | 3003          | 3215          | 6218          |
| 9  | Above 65     | 4633          | 4823          | 9456          |
|    | <b>Total</b> | <b>125863</b> | <b>131087</b> | <b>257760</b> |

### **The Organization of the Camps**

When the fighting gained momentum Vavuniya expected about 100,000 people. The available schools and a large forest area was cleared to prepare for the people. As people started to trickle in they were filling up the schools. All the class rooms were first occupied. Tents were later set up on the open grounds. The schools may have been chosen due to their facilities and existent fencing. There could be ten families living in a class room. The space for each family is not demarcated. They keep the little that they have

as their boundary and imagine it to be their place of safety. Since it gets too crowded in the night the men take shelter under the open sky. When it rains they have to find a spot to stand on the corridor of the school buildings. Some people are also given tents to stay in the school grounds.

In the camps that are located in the open space, people have been given tents to live. There are a variety of tents ranging from the Bedouin tents to the Round tents. The average size tents could be about 10x 10 sq ft. These camps are heavily guarded.

When the camps were set up, they had only a fence. But over the days and months two layers have been added to the fence. It is claimed that, people moved out of the camp using the thin fencing and hence a layered fencing was adopted.

There only one entry to the camp. At the entrance there is an army post. People who want to meet relatives have to give in a petition and wait. The relatives are located and called for to a meeting place. There is a barricade that separates people when they meet. Items that are given to the camp inmates are screened. Electronic gadgets such as radios, cd players and other communication equipment are strictly forbidden. Food items, clothes and a few other items are allowed.

For the past two months there were no sourced to communicate with the outside world. Currently public phones have been placed in some camps to enable the people to stay in touch with the relatives.

## **Enumeration**

After the initial mayhem in the camps, the enumeration process started. As people came into the camps they were housed randomly. Many were separated from their families during the journey. It was almost impossible to locate their family members, relatives or friends. Many had lost family members. In order to keep track of the members and locate their families an enumeration process was started. Though it is only in its nascent stages, it was found that in a camp, 85 families had atleast one person killed in the conflict. The enumeration is currently underway in the camps.

## **Health**

People came to the camps devastated by the war. They barely managed to stay alive during their long walk. Many had not eaten for days. Exhausted as they were, there was a need for immediate medical attention. The injured were taken to the Vavuniya hospitals and were given treatment. The situation of the elderly and children was dire. Due to walking the elderly became vulnerable to diseases and were hospitalized. Those who remain in the camps are fragile. The situation of the pregnant women was pathetic. In some cases women who were full term pregnant reached the camps just in time for delivery. Once they had delivered they did not even have rags to

wipe their new born. In the worst case those who delivered did not have and extra set of clothes to change into.

Some who had sustained internal injuries were afraid even to report them. They feared that they would be branded along with the militants and kept the wounds to themselves. It was reported that a young woman who had injured in her private parts was unable to move. Unable to ask for help she was left to suffer. By chance some volunteers located her and nursed her. Several such cases have been reported on a regular basis.

In the camps diseases such as malaria, viral fever, flu, chicken pox and headaches are common. With a highly compromised immune system the people often fall prey to the communicable diseases. The elderly are especially vulnerable. Some reports claim that people have died out of exhaustion.

### **Sanitation**

The sanitation needs of the camps are far from adequate. But people feel much better off than when they were on the run. Water tanks are being filled in by the tankers on a daily basis. In the schools the existing toilets are being used. In the camps the temporary toilets have been built. People claim that they are being cleaned regularly as well.

Despite the many toilets, they are far from enough. The inadequacy has led people to defecate in the open air. This has caused a series of sanitation problems.

The mosquitoes and other pests are a continuous cause for concern. Many organizations have distributed nets. Despite the fact, the mosquitoes find their way. In some camps people have to remain inside the mosquito nets when they eat to prevent the attack of the mosquitos.

Some steps are being taken to contain them but the sheer number of people concentrated in areas makes it impossible to contain the vectors.

### **Food**

In the initial days, many paramilitary groups were permitted to operate in the camps. It was impossible to deal with the overwhelming needs of the people. Cooked food was taken to the camps but could not be distributed due to the chaotic conditions. There were times when people brought a plastic bag to collect food. Rice, two side dishes and a curry were all put into one bag and were shared by the family. This changed with some organizations being permitted to work in the camps. They gave the non food relief items and the basic amenities such as plates and mats.

The organizations working in with the IDPS found it impossible to provide cooked food for prolonged periods of time. Hence community canteens were promoted. A number of households are grouped together and are given food items. They have to take responsibility to cook.

This seems to have restored minimal dignity among the people. Now they don't have to rush to a spot at a given time to collect food. But the misery is far from over, they continue to live ever dependent.

Baby food, nutritious food for pregnant women, and food for those with special needs is a serious concern. Some welfare agencies have distributed milk powder. Since it is not available on a regular basis and the people cannot afford to buy it, they give it up. They continue to beg for additional rations.

## **Education**

Many camps are located in schools. This has affected the education of the local children. The classes are conducted under the trees. The newly arrived children have lost almost a year of education. Some of them are taken into the regular schools while others stay in the camps. The teachers who were displaced along with them organize some classes for them in a few camps. Recently UNICEF has donated books to the children and is also creating child friendly spaces in some camps.

Vocational education is being planned for the youth. In some places the training has started. Youth from the camps are trained in language and job skills. They are given two identity cards. One is kept at home and the other is kept with them. While they are away the card is used to prove that they live in the camp and the second identity card is given to them as a proof of undergoing vocational education. They use the card when they get by check points.

## **Movement**

The movement of the refugees is strictly restricted. They can't leave the camp. The senior citizens, that is people above 60 years were allowed to leave the camps. They try and find some relatives and leave the camp at the earliest. In some camps where the people moved out trusting their relatives to take care of them find themselves wanting for food. They approach the NGOs privately express their plight and get some food.

Having covered most of the basic areas it is time to look at the popular questions and the justifications. The questions are asked by the media, human rights groups and others concerned with the welfare of the people being kept in the camps.

1. What about people who are kept in the internment camps? They have multi-layer barbed wire fencing.
2. Why are the international agencies not allowed to work inside the camps?
3. What the agencies working in the camps. What are they involved in?
4. All the camp inmates are looked upon with suspicion as if they belong to the LTTE?

5. How long are these camps going to last? Is there a possibility of resettlement?
6. Now who will bargain for the rights of the tamils? LTTE was the face of the struggle!
7. Government will exploit the Tamils further and give them nothing!

### **Justifications**

1. The people have to be guarded and kept in safety. In order to prevent them from escaping and others from entering illegally there is a fence. During the early part of April a few people escaped from the camps and hence there is a high security. People are much better off here than in the forests running to save their lives. There is safety and security. They have food to eat, a roof to live under and some basic needs are met.
2. When the camps were being prepared in Vavuniya in November 2008 there was an invitation given to the International Humanitarian agencies to help in preparing the camps. They showed a cold shoulder. The plan was to prepare for about 100,000 people. The first group of people nearly 30,000 arrived by the end of November – beginning of December. But the INGOs continued their stand. So there is little choice, they had to do good with what they had.
3. There are many local NGOs working in the camps. The UNHCR has provided the tents, the World Food Programme provides food, the UNICEF provides water tanks and takes care of Children's needs. Many local NGOs (about 20) and some INGOs are allowed to work with their local staff.
4. Screening needs to be done. All the inmates have been involved with the LTTE in some way. Some out of choice, some without a choice. So there is a need to take care of the situation. Not let the people suffer any more. Therefore there is a lot of screening and checking that goes on. But not all are looked upon with suspicion.
5. 180 days is the minimum time period that has been given. Resettlement will start. But it will be a long process. It may go on for about two years. Actually, if the people are segregated according to their places of origin it is manageable. Once those from Mannar and Vavuniya are separated there will be very few who are from the Vanni. It becomes easy to handle them. Additionally as soon as the infrastructure is ready people will be able to move freely. The same happened in the East.
6. LTTE claimed to be the sole representative of the Tamil cause. Now that it is dissipated. The image of a sole representative was self-made and did not have the blessing of all the Tamil Speaking people of the Island. Though it was the nominal face that brought the issue to the front it also did a lot of damage in the bargain by not

allowing other democratic forces to grow alongside. They were often considered traitors. That successfully dealt with the emergent leaders. Despite the fact, now there are groups that are coming together to look at a more positive future.

7. The Tamil Politicians have always had trouble in seeing eye to eye even on crucial issues. After the Vaddukottai declaration in 1977, there have been few times that the Tamil Politicians have acted together. This is an opportunity for them to come together and bargain for a common minimum program. The point is that there are leaders. They need to show some sincerity to the cause. Now there is a common ground to fight for the rights.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> This represents only the population in Vavuniya and not Mannar and Trincomalee