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SUMMARY

Vanni: A People Crushed Between Cycles of Violence

Very little has been written about the Vanni, aside from recent reports following the battles at Mullaitivu and Killinochchi. It is an area which is considered militarily important by the security forces and the LTTE, where both parties have imposed hardships on the population for their own gains, resulting in unending misery for the civilian population. The groups concerned include approximately 150,000 displaced civilians from Jaffna and over 250,000 who are native to the Vanni. Freedom of movement is restricted by both the Army and the LTTE, to the extent that corruption and human rights violations are rampant.

The movement of those displaced from Jaffna has been closely controlled by the LTTE in the past. The LTTE originally was the main party to apply pressure on civilians to use the boat service to cross the Jaffna lagoon to the Vanni, but there is also a constant fear of the Army. Often, especially during the Killinochchi offensive, the security forces have not allowed civilians to leave LTTE-controlled areas. Contrary to military statements, it is not the LTTE that is restricting access in recent months to the Vanni as much as the Army. Upon attempts to gain access to Vavuniya town, civilians have been subjected to various levels of harassment,

beatings and arbitrary refusals by the security forces. Young people especially fall victim to this treatment. The whole set-up reinforces the feeling to the Tamil civilians that they are second class citizens in this country, and that their dignity can be tampered with without any hinderance.

The bombing of areas with a large refugee population and the shelling of Killinochchi where the hospital was not spared, have convinced civilians that these raids are often meant to terrorize the people rather than destroy the LTTE. Often bombs have been dropped miles away from stated targets, such as during Operation 'Sathjaya' when Killinochchi hospital was extensively damaged. Even this incident occurred after a curfew was declared and civilians were told to seek refuge in places of worship. Furthermore, in Vavuniya town Tamil militant groups operating closely with the Army, such as the PLOTE and the TELO, have been responsible for harassment of humanitarian workers, and corruption are even and suspected of murder. Two well-known torture centres in Vavuniya town continue to be maintained by the PLOTE and the Counter-Subversive Unit of the Police.

Conditions in refugee camps in Army controlled Vavuniya have been likened to those of a prison or worse. Basic medicine is not available and disease, undernutrition and mental depression are widespread in LTTE controlled areas, where Government food rations are constantly delayed and never enough, and upon arriving at centres they are placed under the strict control of the LTTE, which is often concerned about maintaining levels of stocks, however dire the civilian need. Food rations for the displaced from Jaffna were stopped by the Government shortly after the Army took control of the whole of Jaffna in April. A request from Killinochchi for a desperately needed 40% increase in medical supplies was flatly refused by the Government. Alarmingly, the Medical Committee of the Ministry of Defence cut medical supplies to the Vanni by 75%, to which health officials made no protest. This decision was made just as a large number of wounded civilians needed immediate treatment after the fighting in Killinochchi. Included in this cut were necessities such as treatment for snake bites and chemicals needed for purifying water. As a result, the rural Vanni is rife with hepatitis, typhoid, malaria, meningitis and dysentery, and infant mortality is reported to be on the increase. Clearly, the Government is unable or unwilling to cope with the influx of those displaced by the fighting.

In attempts to escape the horror of living in the Vanni outback, some civilians continue attempts to travel to India. Contrary to official military statements, the LTTE has not needed to pressure civilians very much to make the trip. Large groups of Tamils have been arrested and detained, following attempts to travel by boat to India. Usually about a half of the varying fee charged to go to India is taken by the LTTE, many people having to sell all their worldly possessions to afford the journey. Similar to the system of corruption at military check-points in the Vanni, the LTTE gives travel privileges to those with means, influence and money.

Aside from violations in Jaffna and military control in the Vanni, the people are trying to escape the LTTE's recruitment of their children. There are recruitment centres in nearly every village of the Vanni. Methods often involve psychological coercion and harassment of school children, threats with abuse, abduction and a regular ominous presence over refugee camps. Many of the dead cadre from the recent onslaught at Killinochchi were reported to have been between the ages of 13 and 16. There is at present no pomp and ceremony by the LTTE for the dead youth; they are considered by leaders to be mere fodder for the killing machine. The Vanni is one of the most predominant regions where these young cadre have come from. It is

precisely when this displacement and disruption occurs, that young children become the most vulnerable to the LTTE's campaigns.

The LTTE must be held accountable for this suicidal path which many Tamil youths have been driven down, but the political inertia of the Government and the terror unleashed by the security forces must also be clearly seen as a major factor in this tragedy. In the Vanni, the LTTE remains to exercise a large amount of control and influence, despite the fundamental weakness and unpopularity of its association. Thus, its strength relies heavily on the violence and misery brought to the Vanni by the security forces. Sadly, impunity continues to dominate the politics of this country, with army personnel who are charged with serious violations being released or even promoted. The only hope for the people of the Vanni lies in a political solution which respects human rights, guarantees the physical well-being and dignity of the Vanni people, and works towards a future where the displacement of communities ends.

Vanni: A People Crushed Between Cycles of Violence

Over the last decade the Vanni has been largely a theatre of war about which little has been written. It had a brief notice in international headlines when the Sri Lankan Army massacred more than 100 civilians in Murungan towards the close of 1984. The Vanni comprises the districts of Killinochchi (to the north), Mullaitivu (east), Mannar (west) and Vavuniya (south). In the southeast of the Vanni area is situated the controversial Weli Oya settlement (UTHR(J) [Special Report No.5](#)) from where the army used inhuman methods to displace Tamil civilians and establish a settlement of Sinhalese who regard themselves no better off than prisoners(UTHR(J)Information [Bulletin No.4](#)). Although regarded as a strategic area Weli Oya has been a curse to the Sinhalese and Tamil civilians involved, and a school of indiscipline for the Sri Lankan Army.

Two other events in the Vanni stand out as giving an indication of the ongoing political mismanagement of the problem by the State. On 23rd November 1990, the LTTE attacked the Mankulam army camp which was defended by 250 men. A large number of women cadre took part in the attack. One Black Tiger, Borg (31) of Semamadu, drove an explosive-laden lorry into the camp perimeter. The camp fell. But most of the soldiers, including the commander, Major Daylagala, escaped to Vavuniya. On the 18th of July 1996 the Mullaitivu army camp, defended by some 1250 men, was attacked by the LTTE. About 60 Black Tigers with explosives strapped to their persons were used to breach the forward defences. Very few soldiers survived. Similar tactics were used by the LTTE to break the Army's resumed advance on Killinochchi in late September, but these failed despite the loss of nearly 100 soldiers. From July to September, the estimated LTTE losses were above 1000 dead. Until July most of the Vanni was under LTTE control with the government having hardly any hold on the interior territory, which straddles a 50 mile stretch of the northern trunk road between Thandikulam, just north of Vavuniya, and Elephant Pass on the southern edge of Jaffna peninsula. Government forces are now in control of Killinochchi town and operations are proceeding amidst many uncertainties for civilians and combatants alike.

Our main interest in the Vanni in this report deals with the suffering of civilians who faced intense hardships commencing from the time of the Jaffna exodus late last year. A large number of the native population of the Vanni have themselves become displaced during the course of hostilities. These populations are now scattered mainly within the area south of Killinochchi, west of the Mullaitivu coast and around Mankulam, the UNHCR-run refugee camp at the pilgrimage site around the shrine of Our Lady of Madu, and other parts of Mannar

district. The numbers involved are the displaced population from Jaffna and elsewhere of about 150,000 and a native population of over 250,000 [the official figures emanating from the area are subject to dispute, depending on the vested interests involved]. The humanitarian crisis immediately following the displacement of the population from Jaffna in November 1995 received publicity when the UN Secretary General voiced his concern. It also spurred the government to take some ameliorative measures and Vanni was once more forgotten until July this year, when the overrunning of the Mullaitivu army camp by the LTTE and subsequently the army's temporarily aborted thrust into Killinochchi brought it back into the news.

It has generally been recognised that the Vanni area has played a militarily fundamental role in the ongoing civil war. The area had been regarded unhealthy and unsuitable for human habitation for much of the colonial period. But its agricultural prosperity was revived after the early part of this century with the restoration of tanks, particularly Giant's Tank in the Mannar District and the construction of Iranaimadu Tank near Killinochchi. The population also expanded as the result of a migration of peasants from the Jaffna peninsula and more recently of Hill Country Tamils displaced by starvation in the plantations during the food crisis of the mid 70s. The area has however continued to be educationally deprived. The region was mobilised into Tamil nationalist politics in the 1950s, not as a result of the discrimination in education and employment that concerned mainly the educated urban Tamils, but largely because of fear of the government's colonisation programmes. With the onset of the militancy from the mid-70s, many of the early militant leaders recognised the Vanni as a place where they could readily find shelter and cultivate bases. During the mid-80s, all the militant groups were represented in the Vanni, with the PLOTE having a large following around Vavuniya. However, the nationalism of the native population was not of the ideological sort articulated by their more educated counterparts. There was in fact hardly any antipathy towards the Sinhalese at a personal level. Sinhalese Roman Catholics who were regular visitors to the shrine at Madu found easy social inter-relations with the Tamil population of the region. Today many of them still have ties of friendship and also family ties with the Sinhalese-speaking Roman Catholics between Negombo and Puttalam. Following the onset of the militancy and atrocities by all sides, the Sinhalese population in the Mannar District is now totally displaced.

The LTTE's erstwhile Deputy Leader Mahattaya (recently reported to have been executed by his own group over charges of treachery) who was in charge of the Vanni during the mid-80s, laid the foundation for the LTTE's build-up in the region. He clearly recognised that unlike the urban youth who would be constantly beguiled by alternatives such as emigration, the population in Vanni, once in a situation with their backs to the wall, would fight to the bitter end. Provoking the Army into reprisals against the population became a natural counterpart of such thinking that also actively prevented the people from taking any political initiative. In the present situation we actually do find much of the population feeling cornered with their backs to the wall.

From the onset of the war in 1990 the only contact civilians had with the Government was through aerial bombing by the Air Force. Even Killinochchi hospital's maternity ward was bombed in November 1993. During and before the current military operation 'Sathjaya' (the meaning of which is a mystery to most Tamils) Killinochchi hospital suffered extensive damage. These resulted from shells fired in anger taking no account of the presence of the hospital. Displaced civilians already living in small temporary cajan sheds had to flee once more and live in open spaces around Mankulam and Akkarayan Kulam.

One must also take into account the calculated manipulation of the LTTE. It has become quite evident that the LTTE wanted a build-up of a civilian population in the Vanni to serve three main purposes: to preserve political credibility as the supposed protector of Tamils, to oil the wheels of its war machine and secure resources from international agencies and the State, and to maintain a pool of young persons from among whom it can recruit. This last reason was implied in Thamichelvan's statement at Jaffna hospital during November last year, that they (the LTTE) would not relax their grip on the young generation.

Initial Attitudes Towards the Exodus

Soon after evacuating people from Valikamam in the Jaffna peninsula beginning on 30th October 1995, the LTTE applied enormous pressure on them to use its boat service and cross the Jaffna lagoon into the Vanni. Rash promises were made about providing them with amenities to start a new life. Many of those who left did so because of the fear of government forces particularly when the family had some close relative in the LTTE. But very soon reports started reaching the Jaffna peninsula about the enormous suffering in the Vanni and the utter inadequacy of amenities. There were only a few good houses which were mostly taken over and given to persons with preferential connections. Most of the others had to make do in temporary shelters. Disease was widespread. As difficult as things were for the refugees in the Jaffna peninsula, further inducements to move to the Vanni had little effect.

Around Chavakacheri where the condition of the refugees was among the worst, the LTTE sent cadre to call meetings and persuade people to go. During January some cadre addressed one such meeting. Failing in his first appeal, the speaker singled out a girl and asked her "Why don't you come to the Vanni?" The girl remained silent. Towards the end the LTTE speaker was close to breaking down through exasperation. He said finally, "Please, will not even a few of you agree to go?"

As the rainy season came to an end the crisis in the Vanni became worse. People who had settled in certain areas found their temporary wells drying up. For example people who had been settled in a part of Oddisuddan found that they had to travel one mile to wash and bathe. Around Killinochchi the displaced had to depend on water released through irrigation canals from Iranaimadu Tank. As a result, scabies became quite common among these people. Snake bites and mosquitos were additional hazards. Basic materials for shelter too were very costly. One hundred cadjans sold at about Rs.2500, and a bicycle tyre cost about Rs.2500. Basic medicines when not available at the hospital, were almost unobtainable. As usual the LTTE took charge of stocks of government rations and relief sent for the refugees. Whatever the plight of the civilians it was usually when the new stock arrived that the old stock was released for sale or distribution to the public.

In addition to this, when the LTTE organised meetings and called for recruits the displaced were driven beyond the limits of endurance. When the LTTE came to address meetings people told them angrily, "Back in Jaffna you used to tell us that you had enough people but you only wanted money. We gave you at the rate of Rs.25,000 and Rs.50,000. You then chased us out of Jaffna and have now come to take our children. Get out and don't come back!" In March the LTTE opened the schools and in the higher classes such as O/Level, the students were constantly addressed at meetings. They were told "You must join us now to save Vanni. If not the army will come and finish you off." The response was often to the effect, "Let the army come, we will die once and for all".

Some had come from Jaffna transporting their shops wholesale in hired boats, and spent a good deal of money buying cement at Rs.5000 per bag to put up new shops in Killinochchi. Following the recent army operation which at first stopped short of Killinochchi, these persons too lost their goods and joined the others as vagrants. For much of the time the feeling remained among the displaced in the Vanni that the LTTE had cheated them. With July came a fresh bout of bombing and shelling by government forces and stories of rape and disappearance in army-controlled Jaffna, leading to a feeling that the government did not mean well by them and further that little good could possibly come from it. Their attitude towards the LTTE also tended to become more ambivalent as a result. [\[Top\]](#)

Control of the Civilian Population

Given the state of dissatisfaction among the displaced population, the LTTE also managed applications for permits to leave the area with incredible shrewdness. Soon after the exodus of November 1995, many of those better off and influential were allowed to leave for Vavuniya and Colombo. By about mid-December a clamp-down was imposed and those going generally had to leave a member of the family behind to guarantee their return. In April when the army brought the rest of Jaffna peninsula under its control and reports of hope and relief started coming from Jaffna, the LTTE once more relaxed the pass system allowing people to leave. There was a further relaxation when large numbers of civilians were once again displaced following the army's Killinochchi operation in July. This time however the main obstruction to the people leaving came from the government side. The pass system has thus been carefully managed to permit the exit of those with the means to go to Colombo and even go abroad -i.e those who would have been vocally dissatisfied if forced to remain. The remaining population, the bulk of it, are being carefully cultivated with the LTTE's long term aims in view. Certainly though, those who leave and go abroad are not without their uses.

Among the group who were displaced from the Jaffna peninsula, almost all aspects of their life are under the patronage of the LTTE. Their organisation also reflects the breakdown of trust within the LTTE that came to light prominently with the arrest of Mahattaya in 1993 followed by his reported execution and also the investigation of a number of senior LTTE leaders in 1994 over charges of embezzlement. The administration of the Vanni is such that there are overlapping responsibilities among the different arms of the organisation and even a sense of purposeful rivalry. Reportedly about 14,000 families are from the displaced population of Jaffna fisherfolk, under the care of the Sea Tigers and have been settled in coastal areas. For example, Poonampitty on the west coast has a displaced fisher population mainly from Passaiyur and Madagal. All relief is channelled through the Sea Workers' Welfare Society where the office bearers, though formally elected, are virtually LTTE nominees. Welfare societies for the interior populations are under the Tamil Eelam Administrative Service (TEAS). There are then organisations like the North-East Development Organization (NEDO), Mannar District Rehabilitation Organisation (MDRO), Livestock Producers Association, Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) and the Rural Development Societies(RDS) that were once formed by the government but are now virtually controlled by the LTTE.

The settlement of displaced persons was often haphazard. For example when the LTTE wanted to reopen schools in March it just shifted the refugees out, and a community of toddy tappers from Jaffna was suddenly dumped at Kompansanjan two miles from both Murungan and Kattayadampan. This was an area with no water from where people have to go three miles to fetch water. Cadjan huts were built with material provided by the LTTE. Some of these

communities who were already refugees in Jaffna found themselves suddenly moved out to places where there were numerous snakes and elephants, with little means of making a living. Characteristically, the people are almost never consulted. Under these conditions the international NGOs tended to be very unhappy about going along with the LTTE.

Many of the natives in Mannar and Mullaitivu districts are today part of the displaced population. Following 1990, nearly all those within about 7 miles of Mullaitivu town had been displaced. The populations closest to Mullaitivu town were at Iranapalai, Chemmalai and Mullivaikaal. In Mannar District populations from Arippu and Silavathurai are displaced as these places are subject to shelling from the sea. Thus even here a sizable native population has moved to the interior, to Madu and other areas, some of which like Moonampitty are notably malarial. In the west there is a military fence to protect Thirukethiswaram army camp. There are still about 80 families living in the old native village of Mudatti.

The LTTE's organisational efforts had to do with little direct help from international agencies. It has established an administrative centre at Periyamadu, a Muslim village whose residents had been expelled, seven miles from Madu. (A sizable Muslim population in the area was forced out on orders of the LTTE in October 1990). There it had also established a central dispensary using doctors in its employ. As for economic viability, the fishing population has fared much better. Fuel and materials had been provided to them and the marketing of produce is handled by the LTTE itself. These coastal people show far fewer symptoms of nutritional deficiency syndrome and their mental health is much more sound in comparison with the displaced population in interior areas. In a life that is in the interior absolutely without an independent means of subsistence, mental depression and malnutrition are very common. Many of them suffer from psychosomatic headaches which are not relieved by any normally available treatment.

Coordination between the LTTE and its various institutions is often lacking. Places in the Vanni had been regularly bombed or attacked with rockets by the Sri Lankan Air Force. For example, the Leopards' camp was bombed and missed. Civilians suffer while living in conditions where almost every place is an LTTE target. One example is the Air Force attack on the fishing village of Nachchikuda on the northwest coast last March, when about 16 civilians were killed. The Government, on the other hand, claimed that 30 Tigers were killed. During the month of May the Silavathurai church, which was being decorated for a festival, was bombed killing two civilians.

The social geography of the Vanni areas would be far from complete without describing the aspect of recruitment. Koorai, is a village with a population of Indian origin near which there is also an LTTE unit known as the Young Leopards. Nearly every village has a recruitment centre. Several of those manning these centres are tragic victims of the war who had lost limbs in the course of fighting. There is now no possibility of a life for them outside the Movement. They make passionate speeches to the young of the village waving their truncated limbs challenging the others to sacrifice themselves as they had. They evoke a mixture of pity, horror and shame in others. "If you do not want to go and fight the Sri Lankan forces, give me your arm or your leg. I am itching to go back and fight", they would say. Contrasting with these desperate speeches of 'heroism', there are mass graves for "Heroes" (Mahaveerar Mayanam) in several places, including Pandivirichan and Alkaattiveli. According to reports originating in the latter area, the remains of about 12 very young recruits who had joined only a month earlier were brought for internment during June.

Both the politics and the military strategy of the LTTE has a tendency towards recklessness with cadre resulting in a voracious appetite for recruits. There have been continuing reports of recruitment where a large degree of coercion is used. The following incident took place at the Madu refugee camp on 1st July, 17 days before the assault on Mullaitivu camp. Some LTTE women cadre abducted a young girl who was a refugee from Point Pedro. The girl had several sisters and the family was very angry about it. Some time later the sisters spotted one of the abductresses walking through the camp. They pounced on her removed her weapon and pinned her to the ground. They scolded her, "You Vanni people should know how to behave with us folk who are from Vadamaratchi." Then the LTTE police arrived and negotiated the release of the abductress. This spontaneous resistance touched a raw nerve in the Movement that was sensitive to the slightest hint of dissent. Subsequently armed LTTE cadre surrounded that part of the refugee camp and threatened the refugees telling them that if there is a repeat of this kind of thing, they would not hesitate to shoot. The abducted young girl was never restored to the family.

The rank and file of the LTTE who are mostly young recruits who join the organisation in their teens are trapped inside. Those from the Vanni are largely in this category. It has been a fairly common complaint among parents that a particular vested interest that recruiters have in getting these young boys and girls into the organisation, is to spare themselves the obligation of having to do the fighting or committing suicide with explosives strapped around them. Local observers deny any suggestion that several parents were happy to see their children joining the organisation because they had difficulty in feeding and maintaining them. Recruitment had generally been falling, but during times of displacement and disruption the young are more prone to join through sheer frustration. Once they had joined, parents hardly get to see them or influence them.

The organisation is putting in measures to discourage people from leaving. To this end a new regulation was introduced lately. In earlier times a number of those leaving the fighting units found employment in administrative positions in organisations controlled by the LTTE. The new regulation prevents those leaving the fighting units, from being employed in these administrative positions. [\[Top\]](#)

The Mullaitivu Attack and the Advance Towards Killinochchi

The LTTE assault on the army camp at Mullaitivu was launched during the night of 18th July. The people had no hint that the assault had been planned. The civilians were led to believe that there was going to be an assault on the Elephant Pass camp. It is believed that only a few in the LTTE hierarchy knew the real purpose. According to local sources, the apparent arrangements were suddenly reversed and those taken towards the Elephant Pass area were in a matter of hours redeployed by night in Mullaitivu. It is learnt that the camp defences were breached by sending in Black Tigers with explosives strapped to their bodies who blew themselves up upon reaching the defences. The army had little opportunity to use their cannon. The camp was subdued within two days with heavy loss of life on both sides. Civilians in this area were affected mainly by shelling from the army camps in Manal Aru (Weli Oya).

Tens of thousands of people fled from Mullivaikaal, Thanneer Oottu and Vattapalai because of the shelling. One man, S.Pulendran, was killed in Thanneer Oottu on 21st July and an injured lady, V.Marinayaki (26) died at Killinochchi hospital. The Air Force continued with the bombardment of several parts of Vanni. On 22nd July, bombs were dropped around

Iranaimadu. According to a local report which we have been unable to verify from other sources, four persons travelling in a bullock cart were killed at Iranaimadu junction. On 24th July Mallaavi junction was bombed killing 6 civilians including a two year old child, Sivalingam Sindujah. The others killed were mainly elderly persons including a father, Kadiravel, and his son who were refugees from Jaffna. An elderly woman killed, Sellamah, was from Mallavi itself. These bombing raids continued. As far as all civilians questioned are aware only one bomb dropped from a Kfir bomber struck an LTTE target. This was an LTTE garage in Mankulam. One LTTE cadre and two civilians were killed. One woman was killed when a bomb fell near an LTTE farm in Vattakatchi. The policy behind these bombings as described by a military spokesman and reported in the Colombo press was of this sort: "--- meanwhile air attacks were aimed at LTTE camps in Mankulam, Killinochchi and the Murugandy jungles" (Island, 4th August 1996).

A particular scene after the Mullaitivu attack was reported by people from the Mullaitivu and Killinochchi areas. Bodies of a large number of Sri Lankan soldiers and their weapons were displayed on the ground. The people were summoned and an LTTE spokesman delivered a fiery harangue: "No one should underestimate us. If we knock off another two or three Army camps like the one at Mullaitivu, we would have all the weapons we need. Then no one can stand in the way of our getting Eelam". A number of young people picked up some of the weapons. The speaker then ordered them to put the weapons back. He said, "You first give your names. We will train you. Then the weapons would be yours". The high estimation of the LTTE's strength however wore itself down as the days advanced.

The Army appears to have been unnerved by news of the attack on Mullaitivu and its effect was to make them forget the image of a caring and disciplined army that they had been trying to build. The very next day Killinochchi was shelled from Elephant Pass killing one person in the hospital premises and four others nearby. Three of those were at a jewellery shop. One was a father who had that morning brought home his wife who had delivered a child at the hospital and had then gone to the shop. On 26th July the Government launched its operation towards Killinochchi. Although a curfew was declared at 1 pm and civilians, according to the Government, were asked to assemble in places of worship, the shelling was far and wide. No effort was even made to spare Killinochchi hospital from the shelling. The District Medical Officer's report gives 12 items under damages caused by shelling. These include the OPD, Wards 1,2 & 3, X-Ray unit, theatre, labour room and the residence of the MSF staff. Ward 4 is reported to have been damaged by aerial bombing.

So intense was the shelling that by the time the government announced the curfew at 1 pm on 26th July, the people were already on their own vacating the town. The hospital was subsequently shifted with whatever could be rescued to Mallavi and Akkarayankulam. A witness describing the shelling said that it was like a giant AK-47 automatic firing the whole day. Shells fell even at Murugandy, 5 miles south of Killinochchi and in Akkarayankulam to the west. A few corpses of animals were seen far south of Killinochchi. To the civilians all these had no purpose except to kill or terrorise them. The hospital continued to function in the same premises on the 27th, strongly suggesting that there was no marked LTTE presence in the area. According to civilian sources, the total civilian death was placed at around 20 to 25. [\[Top\]](#)

Lack of Medicine and Relief

With the civilian population displaced and the Killinochchi hospital closed, it was clear that the civilians were in a very bad way. The food distribution system had broken down. About 40% of the medicines were lost and facilities like an operating theatre had to be improvised at Mallaavi in very inadequate premises. Even before the military events of July, the health situation in the Vanni was very bad. Following the exodus of civilians from Valikamam, which almost doubled the population around Killinochchi, the medical authorities at Killinochchi had requested the government for a 40% increase in the supplies. This was not granted. Patients continue to die from illnesses like brain fever because the testing facilities were inadequate or the drugs had become ineffective. LTTE injured were treated at Killinochchi hospital and they were certainly privileged patients. But there have been no verifiable complaints that the LTTE was taking over medicines meant for civilians.

In the case of food, as we have mentioned earlier, all stocks are controlled by the LTTE. Even as the LTTE was launching an international campaign accusing the Government of deliberately starving the civilian population, the stores remained substantially full. It was only around the 26th of August, nearly a week after government relief had started coming into the Vanni from the South, that the LTTE released the existing stocks that were made available to civilians. It might also be mentioned that the Government had unilaterally stopped free food rations for the displaced from Jaffna into the Vanni just after it brought the entire Jaffna peninsula under its control in April.

The normal procedure for supplying medicine is for the Deputy Provincial Director for Health Services in Killinochchi and Mullaitivu, to send his requirements to the Ministry of Health which releases supplies every quarter. Once the Ministry of Health's approval is obtained, it needs to be authorised by the Ministry of Defence before the goods are released. The requirements for the first and second quarter of the year had come through without much difficulty.

The Medical Committee of the Ministry of Defence took its decision on the 3rd quarter's requirements on 3rd September. It approved the requirement subject to a cut of 3/4 of the normal requirement. Among the items totally rejected were Tropical Chloride of Lime (TCL) and Anti-Snake Bite Serum and injections of Pethidine, a tranquiliser. TCL is a necessity in the Vanni to purify water in temporary wells. Snake bites are more common because the people have been displaced. It should also be mentioned that the entire list of requirements submitted by the medical authorities in Killinochchi to facilitate the work of the Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF), was turned down by the Ministry of Defence. The MSF performs some very urgent medical functions including surgery and there were scores of persons with shell injuries from army shelling. The move is again seen by the people as something vindictively aimed at them. The LTTE has little difficulty in getting its medical requirements by other means. This seems to be a game where the Ministry of Health looks good by approving what is asked for but makes hardly any effort to protest, or even critically examine, the actions of the Ministry of Defence.

A report from S. Thillainadarajah, government agent in Killinochchi, dated 25th September, stated the following:

"No improvement in the control of contagious/infectious diseases spreading widely due to absence of pure drinking water. Typhoid, Diarrhoea, Dysentery, Virus fever, infective hepatitis, urinary infection, malaria both positive and cerebral, malnutrition, anaemia are marauding the already vulnerable population. Infant mortality is high.

"It is feared that the oncoming monsoonal rains will make things worse and mass epidemics would be realistic."

The Sunday Island of 6th October 1996 quoted Guillermo Bertoletti, Country Director for MSF, on the situation in the Vanni. Referring to the Ministry of Defence decision taken more than a month earlier (3rd September), he said that basic medical supplies for routine surgery, snake bites, and anti-rabies vaccine, were available only for between 7 and 14 days. He said that at the peripheral unit in Mallavi, "There are no strong analgesics, no oxygen and no blood grouping". Madhu, which he said had not received medical supplies since August, had "no quinine, no saline or Dextrel, very few anti-biotics and low supplies of snake-bite anti-venom". He added, "Even basic items such as folic acid and vitamins for pregnant mothers have not been allowed through by the defence authorities".

Stating that there are ongoing talks with authorities and that "appeals have been made to all necessary sectors", Bertoletti said, "There is hepatitis, typhoid, meningitis, malaria and dysentery, but there are still no epidemics...There is also no malnutrition by international standards but this is being monitored carefully...Our teams are frustrated up there. They are present in the area to heal, but are not able to do it without supplies". In a later Reuters report, (Sunday Island 13th October), Western aid workers were quoted as saying there was undernutrition but not starvation among refugees.

The Deputy Defence Minister said in a Sunday Times interview (6th October): "We made arrangements to receive 125,000 [refugees in Vavuniya]. We took over schools and provided all facilities. We were surprised that people did not turn up. We heard that some of the people coming were stuck at Omanthai without any facilities. We waited for awhile and sent medical supplies".

From this it would appear that the Government's defence of its decision of the 3rd September was to the effect that the people ought to come to army controlled Vavuniya as refugees to receive medical treatment. This process of decision-making is muddled, impractical and indefensible, since, for a start, the maximum number expected in Vavuniya as refugees was less than half the minimum estimated population in the Vanni. [\[Top\]](#)

Through the Eyes of the People

Combatants expressed little concern for civilians, and their statements were intended either to cover up or to score some points at their expense. Once the Mullaitivu operation got under way the passage to the South through Thandikulam remained effectively closed. Where the LTTE is concerned they seem to have been issuing passes quite freely to those who wanted to go South. The decision not to allow people to come into Vavuniya seems to have been taken by the security forces. Patients injured by army shelling whom the Red Cross attempted to take to Vavuniya, were stopped by the army. Several such patients were later taken to Vavuniya by the ICRC and the MSF through the Madu road. Military spokesmen, however, claimed that they "believed that the LTTE had closed the border crossing", adding that 120 trucks loaded with food were waiting to move to the North. This response was after the LTTE had claimed from London that the Thandikulam barrier had been closed by the army and all shipments of food had been stopped for two weeks.

There was also another side to this. In a security measure adopted by the government to prevent smuggling by the LTTE, lorries bringing food from Colombo had to enter a security

zone in Vavuniya from where the supplies had to be taken out and reloaded into lorries coming from the North. The LTTE had used or requisitioned a large number of lorries used to transport food in connection with their activities following the Mullaitivu operation. This was a matter in which lorry operators had no choice. When concern came to be voiced about food supplies to the civilians, the Government itself (as suggested in press reports-e.g. Week End Express 3rd August) asked for lorries to be sent from the North to collect food supplies. 40 lorries duly arrived in Vavuniya on 4th August. Then the unprecedented happened. The drivers and cleaners were badly assaulted even bitten by drunken soldiers and about 14 of them were hospitalised in Vavuniya. Even worse, no disciplinary action was taken against the assailants. It was suggested by local sources that some of the lorries retained smells from having transported dead and injured combatants and the innocent drivers became the victims. As an outcome food supplies to the civilians in the combat zone were stalled for a further nine days.

It had been agreed between the Government and local officials that it would take about 50 lorries per day to cater to the needs of the civilian population. Some civilian sources considered this inadequate since the number referred only to lorries supplying cooperative establishments and excluded private supplies which were previously conveyed. The army permitted civilians to move into Vavuniya only from 13th August. That was also the time that food shipments started in an irregular fashion. The number of lorries permitted varied from only 12 per day to a maximum of 50 per day.

As we shall explain below civilians, particularly the young, faced enormous difficulties in clearing the army check point and coming into Vavuniya. Then even in Vavuniya they had the prospect of spending a number of days in what witnesses have described as sub-prison conditions. Under these conditions a number of civilians decided to cross over to South India. By about the middle of August 118 persons had reached India, rising to 2,000 by mid-September. These persons needed no prompting from the LTTE. The Government, however, was quick to accuse the LTTE of forcing civilians to go to India, thus involving the Indian government as a concerned party (The Island, 16th August). This claim was reiterated by the Deputy Defence Minister.

Soon after refugee arrivals in India received press publicity, Mr. Karunanithy, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, called upon the Indian Central Government to condemn military operations in Sri Lanka. Although the Army was stalled short of reaching Killinochchi, heavy shelling continued that was duly publicised by the LTTE. A Government statement was revealing: "On 14th August one soldier was killed by a sniper in the outskirts of Killinochchi. Troops engaged enemy targets with heavy artillery and mortar fire killing a number of terrorists" (Island, 16th August).

The LTTE statements, although containing falsehood, exaggerations and distortions, at least had the merit of giving meticulously accurate details about the effects of bombing and shelling on civilians. The Government, on the other hand, did not appear to care about what was happening to civilians. Whether in military matters or matters pertaining to the civilians, its statements carried very little credibility. Rather, it seemed the Government was merely reacting to LTTE propaganda and concerns voiced by humanitarian organisations.

In these circumstances, civilians saw no hope from either side. Despite LTTE propaganda, civilians knew that there was food at least for immediate use in stores under the LTTE's supervision. Yet they received their food relief only a month after their displacement when

Government supplies had started coming in. LTTE propaganda aside, civilians in the area remarked, "Even if the people are starving or dying the LTTE will make sure that the stores are kept full". At the same time, civilians felt angry at the manner in which the LTTE had recruited their children. The speeches they regularly heard being made by the LTTE or read in the papers left them with no illusions. They had been told again and again, "More civilians must die. Not enough of you have died. In other countries people gain liberation only after a massive death of civilians". [\[Top\]](#)

Vavuniya: Categories of Citizenship and Unnecessary Excesses of Security

We have remarked earlier that following the Mullaitivu operation, the LTTE had been rather free with passes for the displaced. Their system of checks had also been disrupted. Very often people were able to get passes merely by surrendering their precious family card and making a signed statement giving details of their property - it being understood that if they did not return within their given time the LTTE would assume control of the property. Having obtained their pass they proceed to Omanthai where a lodge built with relief funds is run by the LTTE and each person pays Rs.30 per night. From there they proceed in the early morning towards Thandikulam, paying Rs.20 for a bus ride. The LTTE checks their passes at three points. From the last point they have two options- either to walk for 4 miles or pay Rs.50 for a 3-mile lorry ride bringing them to Panichchaneeraavi Kulam. A further mile's walk and a descent into an open field leaves them facing an army sentry point one hundred yards away.

At the sentry point, they must get into three lines. One line is for those going to Vavuniya in connection with their day to day business - mainly small traders. The second line is for passengers going through to Colombo or elsewhere in the South. The third queue is for persons coming in as refugees. These persons are only allowed to go into supervised refugee camps in and around Vavuniya. Particularly the young, wanting to go South, have to first get a parent or a guardian to get into Vavuniya and make an application on their behalf. They are then summoned to the check point on the basis of a list. At the time of writing, only about 20 to 30 such young persons or fewer were allowed in daily. We will not dwell extensively on this particular aspect as there have been a number of complaints, press publicity and the matter is being taken up with the Government by Tamil representatives. A large number of people had opted for the refugee line even when their intention was to go to Colombo, so as to gain easy entry into Vavuniya. These persons were taken to the camp situated at Nelum Kulam Kalaimagal Vidyalayam.

Those coming as refugees faced no restrictions over entry. But many of them were later picked up from the refugee camps and taken for screening. At one time 1,500 persons were staying in this camp which was a school, having two halls each with an area of 2500 square feet. Each hall became the temporary residence of 300 persons. Many others were accommodated in tents. Initially there were only four toilets (ten more were later being built). People were not allowed to go out initially, but later a three hour pass was issued. Owing to the high concentration of flies one person had to eat while someone else fanned. The fear of an insect called Chakkarapandy getting into the ear holes and burrowing its way inside the head kept people awake during the night. Subsequent to representations being made, the number in the camp was brought down to 800 by clearing government servants, persons with jobs in the Middle East urgently wanting to get to Colombo, and others with influence.

There was then only a marginal improvement in the conditions at the camp. It had one tube well which was used exclusively for drinking water. For other uses, a water bowser brought

two loads a day. Out of all those who entered Vavuniya as refugees only nine families wished to proceed to the permanent refugee camp at Asikkulam, that had 4000 inmates. The rest wanted to be allowed to find their own way. Both the conditions and the restrictions offered so little hope that 25 families opted to go back to the LTTE controlled North and did so.

About 3000 persons who wanted to come into Vavuniya continued to languish at Omanthai, coming daily to Thandikulam and going back if they were not allowed inside. The cost of travel, food and accommodation came to about Rs.200 daily. For the young it was a matter of coming to Thandikulam daily to check if their name was on the list of persons being allowed in. Even for those who were successful in getting into the check-point it was often the beginning of more headaches, trauma and often humiliation. The intelligence officers at the check-point possessed power with no appeal against its use.

For young people, things are even more uncertain. They are questioned at the point of entry by officers of Military Intelligence, and the Counter Subversive Unit and National Investigation Bureau of the Police. All of them maintain separate files. Quite often those being questioned are beaten and young girls are spoken to in abusive language. About 200 or more youth are kept overnight at the entry point screening centre. This process could take up to three days. Those cleared at the interrogation centre to proceed to Colombo are then sent to the camp at Veppankulam meant for south bound travellers. Once they contact friends or relatives in the South by telephone or by fax and get confirmation that someone will take responsibility for them they are transferred to the Railway Station camp from where they board the train after getting clearance.

Residence in Vavuniya itself is now a tricky affair involving complicated procedures and permits. Those who are on the 1993 voters list are the only ones entitled to permanent stay. Others who have cause to reside in Vavuniya are issued three-month permits. These two categories of persons can travel freely to Colombo and back. During the second week of September a new system was introduced where those coming into Vavuniya on business were given only one-day permits which were renewable daily at the Brown Company Camp for up to three days. Following the army's thrust into Killinochchi in late July, Major General Saliya Kulatunge and Mr.Somapala Gunadeera, the Rehabilitation Coordinator for the North, decided that anyone coming into Vavuniya town will be allowed to stay for a maximum of one week. This was said to be a move aimed at preventing further encroachment on crown lands within the town limits.

As for permission for the young to enter Vavuniya from the North, lists are prepared jointly by Kachcheri administrative officials and security officials, but the ultimate authority is the brigadier in charge of Vavuniya. Following complaints, there were moves to involve the Red Cross. This too ran into some controversy as the LTTE also wanted a say in the preparation of lists. In the matter of permission to proceed to Colombo at the three camps at Veppankulam, Nelum Kulam and the railway station, both security and Kachcheri officials are involved. But again the brigadier is the final authority. The civil authority, the Government Agent (GA), has no power in the matter. It is said that the GA has visited the Nelum Kulam camp only twice, facing a barrage of sarcastic questions such as "If we give you Rs.50,000 would you let us go?". Such questions stem from a deep-seated anger among civilians. They have seen people going after invisible arrangements are made. Talk of corruption is widespread.

Each time permit requirements have been tightened, corruption has increased steeply. Soon after the one-day pass system was introduced, a vendor was caught with 600 passes. He was

evidently acting as a sub-agent for persons in the security forces. A number of sources have claimed that backdoor systems enable a young person to come into Vavuniya from the North and proceed to Colombo following a smooth pre-arrangement. Sums ranging from Rs.5,000 to Rs.10,000 have been quoted. Agents are known to operate both from Colombo as well as Vavuniya. There are young persons without influence or money in Omanthai, who have been travelling daily to Thandikulam and getting back for a month, while there are also those who reach Colombo the same day. While screening is necessary for maintaining security, the arrangements in Vavuniya raise some pertinent questions.

Earlier, we quoted the Deputy Defence Minister as having said that the Government had made preparations to receive into Vavuniya, 125,000 refugees from the North (Sunday Times, 6th October). The same paper in an earlier report (18th August) quoted S. Ganesh, GA Vavuniya, to the effect that 35 schools and other buildings had been done up to accommodate a huge flow of refugees. The same report quoted refugees arriving in Vavuniya, after walking 40 to 50 miles, as saying that they expected thousands of others to follow them and that the LTTE was placing "no restrictions on civilians leaving the area".

Eventually, though, a total number of nearly 3,700 displaced persons (GA Vavuniya's figures) arrived in Vavuniya from August 13th (when the army first allowed civilians) to early October, of whom 1,200 remained in 'Welfare Centres'. Contrary to available testimony, the Deputy Defence Minister claimed that the LTTE had stopped the refugees proceeding to Vavuniya from Omanthai.

Describing what was in store for the refugees, the second report (18th August) had quoted GA Vavuniya: "These people will not be allowed to step out of the schools allocated to them and police will restrict their movements from outside the camps making sure that nobody escapes". Coming from a closely watched, experienced administrator in a sensitive position, this remark has a strong hint of tongue-in-the cheek.

The Defence Ministry, apparently the chief architect of the plan, appears to have failed to ask the brigadier in Vavuniya how long it would take his outfit to screen the 125,000 people expected. At best, about 120 persons of all ages were screened daily to leave Vavuniya for other areas. Specifically among the youth, the number was at best 25 a day. At this rate, it would have taken about 1,000 days to screen such a refugee influx. [The last time a large number (about 1,000) were screened and allowed to pass through Vavuniya was on 31st January, the day of the Central Bank bomb blast. From that time the numbers had been dwindling]. Such lengthy confinement under the conditions prevailing at the 'welfare centres', would have been so appalling that the Government would have become vulnerable to some very extreme allegations of repression. It was not a prospect the civilians would readily exchange, even for conditions and uncertainties in the Vanni outback.

In early October, the Nelunkulam refugee camp was closed to reopen the school. The inmates, then numbering about 400, were shifted to the more commodious College of Education premises. Only 45 families had opted for refugee status. The one-day pass system was relaxed by issuing one-week passes, extendable on a weekly basis. The number of persons in Omanthai waiting to enter Vavuniya had also dropped to about 1,800, many having given up trying.

There is an important lesson to be drawn from this episode. While security concerns cannot be glossed over, the plan such as the one mentioned here was wholly unrealistic. Local observers

noted that the administrative machinery finds it impossible to cope with even the present influx - so much so that the routine administrative work at the Vavuniya Kacheri is almost at a standstill. Other facilities were grossly inadequate - e.g. apart from the question of shelter, only two water bowsers were available, with one used for the security forces. They conclude that accomodating the 125,000 refugees talked about was pure fantasy. Was it purely a propoganda gesture? If so, it makes the decision to slash medical supplies even more inexcusable. The next time such a scheme is talked about, it ought to be dismissed outright.

As to conditions in Vavunia, a number of good articles have appeared in the press and the Tamil political parties have repeatedly made representation. Yet even in relatively easy matters, just to make the civilians feel that they are treated as human, the Government has been unable to make any notable impact. It seems too much to expect such a state machinery to re-evaluate its stubbornly unchanging practices in the use of bombing and shelling that have helped to render peace a receding prospect. [\[Top\]](#)

For Whose Benefit?

Importantly, one needs to ask whether the purposes of security are realised by these arrangements in Vavuniya. Certainly Vavuniya appears normal. But behind it there is an eerie atmosphere where several disconnected security establishments operate with impunity. Two well known landmarks in Vavuniya are the torture centres, one at Malar Maligai under the PLOTE, and the other is Ramya House inside the Air Force camp, under the Counter Subversive Unit(CSU). There have been about 20 murders in Vavuniya town since the August 1994 elections that were unconnected with normal crime. Several of the bodies that were found in public places were unclaimed. A notable murder was that of Sritharan, a highly respected young social worker in early January this year. Although a government employee, he gave his spare time unstintingly to the relief of refugees at Asikkulam camp. The finding of his body with about 100 stab wounds remains an "unsolved" murder although the PLOTE is widely suspected. It is suggested that his voluntary labours posed a challenge to the PLOTE that had its own agenda for the refugees.

Individuals who try to do some public service such as volunteering for social or medical work, have complained of being accosted threateningly by the PLOTE. There is also the case of a Co-operative Society convoy officer who used to accompany relief convoys to the North. Upon returning one day with the money accrued from sales, he went missing in Vavuniya town. At that time he had Rs.23 lakhs in his possession.

The PLOTE, a Tamil militant group, has worked closely with the Sri Lankan Armed Forces since 1990. Many of its cadre in Vavuniya were imprisoned by the Indian authorities after the Maldivian fiasco of 1988, where they had acted as mercenaries in an attempted coup. Among the notorious figures are Manikkathasan and Alavanguthasan, who are held responsible for a number of murders. According to knowledgeable sources Manikkadasan and Alavangudasan are held by the authorities to be prime suspects in the murder early last year in Colombo of Karavai Kandasamy, an elderly PLOTE spokesman, who was earlier in the Left movement. More recent killings, as documented below, point to Vavuniya having become the home turf for the activities of PLOTE and TELO, who in official jargon are now part of the 'democratic process'. The PLOTE, of course, has three MPs in the Vavuniya district who have vested interests in trying to win the support of the people. It has been suggested that even these MPs are afraid of the two aforesaid gentlemen.

Arjuna was the political and military leader of the PLOTE in Trincomalee. At the central committee level, he opposed Manikkadasan's control over his area on the grounds that the group was being thrown into disrepute by its association with abduction and murder. During last July (1996), Manikkadasan requested Arjuna to come to Vavuniya to settle the matter. When he did so he was abducted and killed. According to low ranking PLOTE cadre, their own group was responsible for the murder of Arjuna.

Jainudeen was a well known van driver in Trincomalee who was associated with the Directorate of Military Intelligence. Around 1992, he had a quarrel with the TELO when a member of the group was detained on charges of abduction. During last September, Jainudeen came to Vavuniya by van with two others. All three were found murdered.

During the first week of October journalists from the 'Yukthiya' went to Vavuniya to do an investigative report. Asked about the killings and shooting incidents in town, Gamini Silva, Senior Superintendent of Police, Vavuniya, was non-committal. He said that there were many lapses in discipline both among policemen and soldiers, a number of whom he himself had to punish.

He cannot therefore, he said, expect more discipline from the Tamil militant groups. Concerning the murders, the SSP admitted that a number of them had taken place in town which the police duly recorded. But beyond this they had drawn a blank. He did not give the impression of being unduly perturbed. He did however add significantly, that nearly all the victims were non-residents from outside Vavuniya town - a strong hint that the LTTE was not generally involved.

The 'Yukthiya' team also interviewed Siyambalagaswewa Wimalasara, chief incumbent of the Vavuniya town Buddhist temple, among the senior most Buddhist monks in the country, and also a much respected peace activist having regular dialogue with all communities. He was much more forthright. He said: "We all know that the LTTE is not responsible for these incidents. You know that the LTTE carries munitions and devices through the security system in Vavuniya all the way down to Colombo, to carry out devastating attacks. If the LTTE so wishes it has the capacity to do something really big in Vavuniya - not just shooting a few policemen and individuals".

A murder that received publicity recently was that of Subramaniam, a Colombo based textile merchant. He was detained in Colombo by the CSU and brought to Vavuniya on suspicion of having links with the LTTE. He was released from Anuradhapura prison on a fundamental rights application after nearly 4 months in custody. He was last seen a few days after his release on 13th July, going to the CSU office in Vavuniya to collect his personal effects. What was believed to be the burnt remains of his body together with another body were found in Nikeravettiya. It was reported in the press that the CID who were asked to investigate the murder, arrested the coordinating officer in charge of the CSU at Vavuniya along with four other personnel (The Island, 16th August). The brazenness with which the crime was committed is a measure of the extent to which such practices had been ingrained in the system. Whether the vested interests which underly such violations will allow justice to take its course is a question to which an answer is anxiously awaited.

What exists in Vavuniya can be described as a 'mafia set-up'. It is said that almost every racket related to such an outfit goes on there except for drugs. The basis of this is the high level of cash flow in Vavuniya that feeds a variety of interests. It is a central town servicing

the traffic of goods and people from the North to the South and vice versa. Cash flows vary in form from private funds from relatives in Western capitals, to NGO and rehabilitation funds. Because of this the town is able to put up with a level of extortion much higher than what provincial towns like Batticaloa and Trincomalee would have been able to bear. It is said that even when the Rehabilitation Ministry allocates transportation charges for North-bound lorries, taxes by the PLOTE and even the LTTE are included. According to a social worker, the PLOTE recently ran up a repair bill of Rs.4.5 lakhs for their vehicles at a garage. This visible racketeering by Tamil groups in league with the armed forces may just be the tip of the iceberg. Elements of the security forces are credited with being into it in a big way.

There were attacks in Vavuniya town on 27th August and 20th September. In the first incident a CSU vehicle was fired at inside the town killing two police personnel, 2 soldiers, 12 civilians and injuring 10 policemen. The second attack took place at the Vavuniya railway station in the night, shortly after the departure of the Colombo train, injuring 5 off duty policemen, including two women. No one is sure who was responsible. Many suspected the PLOTE in the first attack, suggesting that the PLOTE was unhappy after its cadre were withdrawn from the Thandikkulam check point over complaints that they were demanding money from travellers. These sources are clear that the LTTE maintains a significant presence in Vavuniya town, mainly for intelligence purposes, but that the LTTE would not like to create too much disruption in Vavuniya since they need supplies from the South to continue flowing to the North. [\[Top\]](#)

Passage to India

Life in the Vanni is definitely becoming intolerable. Among the pressures facing parents are the aggressive tactics used by LTTE recruiters on their children. To take a young person to Colombo could however involve bribes of well over Rs.5,000. On top of humiliation and harassment, upon reaching Colombo the young Tamil is again faced with the impunity and arbitrariness with which the security forces act. Irritations in Colombo may range from off-duty policemen calling over for petty favours to being picked up by the police and released after a bribe is arranged, or having an indefinite detention order slapped on and sent to prison to live alongside criminal elements. Life in the Eastern province or in the Jaffna peninsula held no greater promise. Staying in a refugee camp in Vavuniya under sub-prison conditions can be a dehumanising experience lasting several weeks or months.

Apart from such considerations, given the choices facing these people enumerated above, paying Rs.6,000 to a boatman for a passage to India would have seemed a bargain. Once accepted as refugees in India, restrictions placed on them are minimal. Most would have been free to travel from Mandapam to Madras and back without any hindrance, in sharp contrast to what it would take to travel from Vavuniya to Colombo. Moreover, for those depending on money from family members abroad, life in India would be far cheaper, considering especially that they have little to go back to after having lost their property in Jaffna last October. Thus, quite apart from whatever interest the LTTE may have in the matter, the Government first needs to look closely at the plight of Tamil civilians resulting from its own misplaced actions.

On Sunday 6th October the Sri Lankan Navy detained 107 Tamil refugees bound for India from the mainland coast. It was claimed in Colombo that the boat was overloaded and about to sink when the Navy 'rescued' the passengers. The passengers, comprising 33 males, 33 females and 40 children, are now held at Al Hazar Vidyalayam (School), Mannar and look

frightened, according to local reports. They had reportedly paid Rs.8,000 per head for their passage. The Navy had earlier (17th September) detained 21 refugees and eight Indian fishermen from two Indian trawlers off the Mannar coast. On 11th October, another boat was detained with 28 refugees (8 men, 9 women and 11 children). A graphic illustration of the desperation confronting those fleeing to India is the capsizing of a boat off Mannar in bad weather on 14th October in which 14 civilians, including 7 children, were drowned.

In a report filed by S. Annamalai in the Madras Hindu (6th October), Indian authorities were quoted as saying that there had been a "controlled influx" since February this year. "The arrivals picked up momentum on 31st July, and from this date till October 1st, 2,933 Sri Lankan Tamils reached the Rameswaran coast". According to this report, the fare paid by a passenger ranged from Rs.300 to as high as Rs.15,000 for an adult. A boat owner originally from Valvettithurai is said to have charged Rs.5,000 for a child.

This is in fair agreement with the information gathered from local sources. According to these sources, the going rate at Nachchikudah is about Rs.10,000 per passenger, of which Rs.5,000 goes to the LTTE. Passengers are taken to an island and transferred to Indian fishing vessels. The refugees are finding the money for the journey by often selling their remaining possessions. For example, two men rode into Nachchikudah on a Honda 90cc motorcycle. Immediately local residents started bidding for this coveted possession. The men then rode the further 3 miles to the sea-coast, negotiated a price with the boatman and proceeded to India.

The pattern has now emerged. After the attack on Mullaitivu army camp, the LTTE was, according to reports, canvassing civilians in the area to go to India. On the other hand, with mounting reports of violations by the Army in Jaffna and the impending control of much of the Vanni by the Sri Lankan forces, India came readily as a safe destination for many families with LTTE links. According to persons coming from this area the fare being charged to these segments of society was a modest Rs.1,000, with the LTTE taking Rs.500. When others too in desperation wanted to leave, higher prices owing to various circumstances, including actions taken by the Indian coast guard, became an effective barrier.

We mentioned earlier that the Defence Ministry expected 125,000 refugees to come into Vavuniya and then blamed the LTTE for placing restrictions. In fact, the LTTE did not need to place restrictions because the Army and the government machinery were effectively restricting people from leaving the LTTE-controlled area. The LTTE was freely issuing passes charging a mere Rs. 200/= for an application form and a further Rs 500 for young persons. Having gone to a lot of trouble gathering people into the Vanni, it is doubtful if the LTTE would have watched indifferently if 125,000 actually marched into Vavuniya. The question did not however arise.

Thanks to the ineptness of government policy, the LTTE has been given a wide range to respond to constraints through a policy of controlled outflow in some respects advantageous to itself, while turning the ire of the people against the Government.

Children in Violence: Questions arising from conditions in the Vanni

In the present report we have also alluded to a unit named the Young Leopards who are in a camp at Koorai in the Mannar District. According to local sources the training given to these young recruits is not so much to do with shooting as with the use of swords and knives. Many of them are said to be very young children recruited recently in the Eastern Province and

brought to the North. Along with the methods of recruitment we have mentioned in the past, the use of psychological pressure on children in the Vanni schools is increasingly aggressive.

There have been reports to the effect that many of the LTTE casualties during the army's late July thrust into Killinochchi, were very young persons. Moreover, in press notifications of LTTE casualties unlike in the late 80s and early 90s, one today notices markedly fewer officers of ranks such as captain, major and lieutenant colonel. Indirect corroboration of this comes from the wider use of suicide operatives in the battlefield. A group of persons who had seen several years of active service in the LTTE were asked how many Black Tigers (suicide squad) there were today. They replied that the number was so high that they had stopped maintaining a ceremonial record. It was the ethos of an organisation where the young were constrained not to see beyond the prospect of a life that was short and brutish.

These qualitative observations concerning this phenomenon of child soldiers, is part of the reality where the LTTE has silenced a whole community and made it powerless. The LTTE's deployment of child soldiers has also been used as part of a major propaganda campaign against the LTTE by the Government. It is, we think, important that anyone who cares for the Tamil community must hold the LTTE accountable for the creeping destruction of the community that the phenomenon of child soldiers entails. It is something that needs to be done with moral responsibility. But have those who have talked about this phenomenon in the South and in the Foreign Ministry shown a sense of moral responsibility?

International agencies that have shown a concern about this problem as a world-wide phenomenon, such as the UNICEF, are quite right to highlight this tragedy. But at the same time, as even this report would suggest, we have a state structure here that is almost entirely unsympathetic to the Tamil problem. It is manned largely by persons to whom the Tamils come alive, not as people, but only as dreaded suicide bombers. A large part of the responsibility in dealing with this problem falls ultimately on the good sense of the people in this country. The fact that the crisis has come to its present state is a harsh judgement on this country's intellectual culture. Our academic traditions leave much to be desired and our culture is very deficient in self-examination.

Look for example at the other aspect of this phenomenon of child soldiers. Take the case of mothers who have faced years of living in continual hysteria owing to the effects of bombing and shelling, and death or disappearance of loved ones. Very often parents have had to relinquish control over their children owing to conditions resulting from the callousness of the State. What we have is a community where a substantial section of it needs to keep swallowing psychiatric pills to prevent their brains from popping out. [\[Top\]](#)

A Defeatist Approach?

The plight of the Tamils and the intricacies of the current crisis, apart from the politics of the South, cannot be isolated from the methods used by the LTTE. It must be mentioned that even humanitarian openings in the South are relentlessly used by this organisation to service its programmes of terror. Far from liberating the people it seeks to trap them and bind them in a dance of death. There are now strong indications that the leading operative in the Dehiwela train bomb blast on July 24th, which claimed about 65 lives, was sent to Colombo under the care of an unsuspecting couple after the Jaffna exodus late last year. A large number of civilians have been constantly wanting to flee the deteriorating conditions in the North.

Between December last year and April this year the pass system was operated stringently. A large number of civilians who came to the South have admitted privately that pressure had been applied on them to indirectly help LTTE operations in the South. The request, accompanied by the dangling of a pass, was usually to take a young person along with them on a vague pretext or to provide accommodation to someone connected with the organisation. All of them kept on giving personal reasons to wriggle out until the pressure was withdrawn. There are also persons who became so frightened that they withdrew their application for a pass.

Looking back at the 13 years of civil war, the ups and downs of military fortunes have been largely irrelevant. What is of significance is that little has been done politically to dent the legitimacy of a cause even so weak as that which the LTTE represents, and one that has been so devastating to Tamil society. While hopes were raised last year of a successful political bid by the Government to bring peace, it now seems that the Government has lost the political initiative and has allowed practices among the security forces which brought the country into disrepute to gain the upper hand.

Not surprisingly, this loss of initiative was reflected in a petulant response to the Amnesty International report of mid-August by the Government as well as in editorial commentaries, particularly in the government-controlled Daily News. The following paragraph from the report is very relevant to the present state of affairs in Sri Lanka:

"Human rights are at a crucial juncture in Sri Lanka. The Government has given repeated indications of its commitment to the protection of human rights. How it will put this commitment into practice in the next year or so will determine whether respect for human rights is restored in the country. How the Government takes forward the process of public acknowledgment of past human rights violations and the bringing to justice of those responsible will be a further key test of its stated commitment."

A series of events this year boded negatively for human rights in the foreseeable future. This is sad considering that the Government had initially meant otherwise. The first in the series was the suspension of action on the President's order to the Army Commander to send on compulsory leave about 200 security personnel, including officers at brigadier level, who had been implicated in serious human rights violations before ongoing commissions of inquiry. Then came in February and June respectively the release on bail of security personnel detained in respect to the 'Corpses in the Lakes Affair' during August last year, and the Killiveddi massacre of February this year. From April this year three brigadiers who faced charges for serious violations had been promoted to major general. Though this may be pragmatically justified as unavoidable in fighting an adversary such as the LTTE is, it has on the other hand helped the old discredited order in the armed forces to regain their initiative.

The reverses of July provided the setting for the latent institutions of terror to reassert themselves again. We see a disturbing rise in routine violations. After the Army made a good start in Jaffna we are now faced with a rising incidence of disappearances, murder and rape in Jaffna. Some serious violations following the Mullaitivu reverse are only now coming to light. The brazenness of the murder in Vavuniya with which the CSU has been associated, and the subsequent murders in Vavuniya, could hardly have taken place without an unfavourable change in the atmosphere concerning the respect for human rights. It is not merely the security forces on the ground but also the government institutions at higher levels have been conniving in a vindictive approach to the people of the Vanni.

The fight against the LTTE is thus being pursued in a defeatist frame of mind that is instead more productive in violations and corruption. Moreover the censorship which prevailed until early October 1996, appears to have entailed the Government believing its own propaganda which bears little in relation to reality, and then getting angry when it is contradicted. The current mood of defeatism comes from the political leadership losing a sense of direction.

The Government cannot go on trying to deal with this problem under the constraints of covering up for the security forces on the one hand, and on the other, trying not to offend dominant ruling class interests in the South in its search for a political solution. The original aim of the Government, to bring justice to the much abused masses of the people and to give this country a proud place as a nation where human rights prevail, are laudable ones which are now under a cloud. The Government is also handicapped by a machinery whose acquired inertia over the years would hardly allow it to respond creatively to the dangers confronting this country. The only hope lies in a drastic political initiative, having at its core an uncompromising respect for human rights, that would restore a sense of purpose and direction.