

TAMIL GUARDIAN

No. 370 ISSN 1369-2208

WEDNESDAY APRIL 09, 2008

free fortnightly

How terror of being 'disappeared' haunts Tamils

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Sri Lanka shells Madhu churches as Tigers resist Army offensive

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Sri Lanka Army shells have already destroyed one shrine within the Madhu church complex. Shells have exploded in the cemetery and in the dining hall also. The famous 'Our Lady of Madhu' statue "has become a refugee in her own land" the Mannar Bishop protested. Photo STR/AFP/Getty Images.

'Elections' come quicker than resettlement and safety for the Tamils in the militarised East

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NEWS

Families of ACF victims doubt justice

RELATIVES of seventeen aid workers massacred in Sri Lanka said they did not expect justice, as a heated human rights inquiry began on March 24 into their execution-style murders more than a year ago.

Ravi Shantha, the aunt of one of the Action Contre la Faim (ACF) aid workers killed in August 2006 in the northeastern town of Muttur, told a panel of judges appointed to investigate rights abuses in Sri Lanka that too much time had passed.

The 17 Tamil workers were shot in the head and were lying face down in the ACF compound.

"I don't trust that I will be given justice in this case," Shantha said to Reuters after giving evidence about the last known movements of her nephew Ambigavathy Jayaseelan.

"It's almost two years. Nobody has talked about justice and I do not think I will be able to get it, even after this," she said at the end of an emotional four hours in the witness box.

Nordic truce monitors have blamed the massacre, at the time the worst attack on aid workers since a 2003 bomb attack on the United Nations office in Baghdad, on state security forces.

The government has accused ACF of being responsible for the massacre of their own local staff through "negligence" and "irresponsibility" in the midst of a 25-year civil war between government forces and Tamil Tigers.

After initially denying fault, and then blaming the Tigers, the



The first anniversary of the killing of the 17 ACF workers marked in France with flowers. Photo Eric Feferberg / AFP / Getty Images

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International rights panel ends work in Sri Lanka

AFP

AN international panel invited by Sri Lanka to observe the government's probe into human rights abuses shut down operations on March 31, three weeks after accusing Colombo of failing to tackle the issue.

The International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP) was formed to observe an inquiry into 16 cases of serious rights violations, including the August 2006 massacre of 17 local employees of the French charity, Action Contre la Faim (ACF).

The panel said in a statement that they were halting their efforts to determine whether the inquiries were being conducted "in accordance with internationally

accepted norms and standards."

Last month, the panel had accused the government of lacking the political will to investigate the incidents and said Sri Lankan authorities did not meet the basic minimum standards in investigating serious rights abuses.

The IIGEP's final report is expected to be presented to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse before the panel's office formally closes on April 30, the group said. Key international personalities, who were earlier invited by Rajapakse to observe the inquiry proceedings, have since left the island.

Colombo has come under fire for its rights record, with Human Rights Watch saying recently that at least 1,500 people - mostly ethnic Tamils living in the island's

restive north and east - had "disappeared" between 2006 and 2007.

The New York-based rights group said Sri Lanka was one of the world's worst perpetrators of "disappearances" and abductions, and described the situation as a "national crisis".

Sri Lanka's cabinet last week approved a plan to enact laws to protect witnesses to crimes and to encourage them to testify in cases of abductions and disappearances.

International concern over the human rights situation in Sri Lanka has been mounting amid the government's escalating war against the Tamil Tigers.

Fighting has stepped up since January, when Colombo formally pulled out of a six-year-old truce with the Tigers.

NEWS

Jeyaraj Fernandopulle killed in blast

SRI LANKA'S Minister of Highways and Road Development, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, was killed in a bomb blast at a public playground in Weliweraya, in the Gampaha district of Western Province, around 8:00 a.m. April 6.

Fourteen others were killed and 60 wounded in the attack that took place while the minister was waving a flag to start off a marathon race in connection with the Tamil and Sinhala New Year celebrations.

The minister had walked up to the starting line where more than 100 athletes had lined up and at the countdown a huge blast shattered the occasion. "Ready, on your marks, steady...", the official had said over the public address system, moments before the huge explosion.

An athletic coach attached to the sports ministry, Luxman de Alvis, and an Olympic marathon runner, K. A. Karunaratne, who was formerly attached to Sri Lanka Army, were killed in the blast, according to initial reports. A police SSP was among the seriously wounded.

Police claimed that the blast was caused by a suicide attacker, charging that the LTTE was behind the attack. However, eyewitnesses saw a parcel being thrown just before the blast.

Fourteen-year-old Kavindu Nadishan, a participant at the marathon said he wanted to relieve himself and went to the cemetery

close by when he saw a man throwing a parcel towards the road, reported the Daily Mirror.

He said the blast occurred just then. One of Nadishan's hands was fractured from the impact of the blast, the paper reported.

The 55-year-old minister, who is also the chief government whip of the Sri Lankan parliament, has been elected to Sri Lankan parliament for five consecutive terms.

He was a close associate of the Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa and played a key role in strengthening Sri Lanka's relationship with Iran since 2006, when he was the minister of trade, commerce, consumer affairs and marketing development.

He was fluent in Sinhala, English and Tamil languages and functioned as a propaganda spokesman for Sri Lanka's ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government.

Mr. Karunaratne participated in the Olympic marathon in 1992 and in the 1993 World Championship. He has a gold medal in the marathon and 10,000 metres in the South Asian Games in 1991.

Thusitha Neranjan, 22, said he was among the crowd watching the marathon organised by one of his tuition masters in collaboration with the Adishta Sports Club of Weliweriya, the Daily Mirror reported. "I was several metres away from where Minister Fernandopulle was. Just before the Minister flagged the race



there was a huge explosion and we all fell," he said.

Ten-year-old Sashishan was 2 metres away from the explosion but in the midst of the crowd, the paper said. "I felt I was hit with something on my chest and ran away for my dear life," he said.

Another senior politician's bodyguard was killed Sunday when his motorcycle collided with another vehicle while returning from the hospital to which most of the injured were rushed, police said. A rider who was providing security to the escort of parliamentarian Basil Rajapaksa was killed and another seriously injured when their bike collided with a lorry.

Ganepola Arachchige Bandula Perera Wijesekara, a member of the Western Provincial Council, is to succeed Mr. Fernando in the Sri Lanka parliament.

Sri Lanka pulled out of a six-year-old Norwegian arranged truce with the Tigers in January, since when fighting has escalated.

Police and Army personnel inspect the scene of the blast in Colombo that killed Minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle as he was starting a marathon race. Photo courtesy Daily Mirror

EU, US condemn killing, urge political solution

Daily Mirror

IN the aftermath of Sunday's attack which killed Minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle and 14 others and injured more than 83, the International Community Monday reiterated the urgent need for a negotiated political solution to end the longstanding ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

The European Union, the United States and Australia in separate statements called for an end to hostilities and the resumption of peace talks as the only way forward if peace was to return to Sri Lanka.

"I am deeply shocked by the heinous attack on Highways Minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle. I strongly condemn this suicide attack, which killed Minister Fernandopulle, 14 civilians and injured many innocent bystanders," EU External Relations Chief Benita Ferrero-Waldner said.

She said the EU condemned all forms of terrorism and violence against civilians and continued to believe that there could be no military solution to the conflict but only a negotiated political settlement that could pave the way for lasting peace in Sri Lanka.

The United States insisted that it was not continued violence but a political solution that offered the way forward to end the ethnic conflict.

A US embassy statement said the United States strongly con-

demned the attack that claimed the life of Minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle.

"The United States denounces this vicious and reprehensible terrorist attack on civilians in the strongest possible terms. Its perpetrators have achieved nothing other than to cause further suffering among the people of Sri Lanka. Not continued violence but only a political solution was the way forward to end the country's longstanding conflict," it said.

The Australian government said a political settlement developed in dialogue with all affected communities was urgently needed to bring lasting peace to the country.

It said "the use of terrorist methods by the LTTE is completely unacceptable."

The Australian government sent its "most sincere condolences to Mr. Fernandopulle's family and the families of others killed and injured in this terrible attack."

It said it was concerned about the escalation of violence in Sri Lanka and condemned terrorism in all its forms.

"Sri Lanka's conflict cannot be resolved militarily. Australia encourages the Sri Lankan government and all parties involved to redouble their efforts to develop realistic proposals to support a political solution to the conflict," it added.

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NEWS

Sri Lankan monks' party rejects path of non-violence

Raymond Thibodeaux
VOA

THE leader of Sri Lanka's Buddhist monk political party is calling for a resolution to the country's 25-year war between government forces and Tamil militants. The monk, who heads a party in Sri Lanka's parliament, supports using the military to do it.

Athurliye Rathana, a Buddhist monk who heads the Jathika Hela Urumaya party in Sri Lanka's parliament, wants to end the suffering by putting a quick end to the war.

Speaking with VOA at a seaside hotel at a former tourist haven, Rathana says he supports the government's latest military offensive to quash the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

"Anytime a militant group is harmful to peaceful people, then government should have the right to exercise constitutional law and order," Rathana said.

"And, LTTE is unlawful and so, under our constitutional law, anyone cannot exercise militancy. But [with] the LTTE separatist

movement, the government has some duty to control their military activities. I say only one thing, 'Please do your duty.'"

For comments like that, the Sri Lankan media has branded Rathana the "war monk," an anomaly in a country where most monks are committed to nonviolence.

But his sentiments are common in Sri Lanka's majority ethnic Sinhala community.

Rathana is a celebrated figure in this predominantly Buddhist nation, where monks are cherished for their spiritual guidance.

The pro-war activism of Rathana and others has spurred as many as 30,000 Sinhalese young men to join the army in the past few months.

But Rathana has many critics. Among those is Mano Ganesan, a Tamil member of Sri Lanka's parliament.

"I'm surprised. Buddhism teaches non-violence and love for another," Ganesan said.



JHU monk Athurliye Rathana is known as the 'war monk' for his support of violence against the LTTE and his calls for more Sinhalese to join the military effort

"Whereas, in this country, in the name of Buddhism, they propose killings, they propose murders, they propose abductions, even these extra-judicial killings and disappearances have been justified by these very monks in this country. Can you believe it?"

Rathana's activism was energized after the 1998 bombing of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka's spiritual capital, Kandy - allegedly by Tamil militants.

He says the temple is sacred to Buddhists because it houses a tooth allegedly snatched from Buddha's funeral pyre.

He says the barrages of attacks

and suicide bombings aimed at civilians by alleged Tamil militants have spurred many Sri Lankans - Buddhist and otherwise - to call for military action.

"As the Buddhist way of life, under the Buddhist philosophy, we cannot invade any country and we cannot disturb others," Rathana explained.

"Under the Buddhist way of life, it is wrong. Why [are we] involved in conflict as a Buddhist country? Any occasion we did not react against Tamil people, if such incidents happened in India, in Pakistan and in America - [where] Muslim people attack churches or any sacred place - I

think common people are roused and confused. We are also confused. But we never attack normal Tamil civilians. That is the truth. That is the heart of Buddhism."

Violence has flared up again in this former tourist haven, as government troops regained territory in the island's eastern fringes.

Fighting still rages in the north, where aid groups operating in the region have reported that hundreds of Tamil militants and civilians have died over the past few months. Their claims cannot be independently verified because the government has barred journalists from travel near the front lines of the conflict.

Defence Ministry calls for suicide bombers to surrender

SRI LANKA'S Defence Ministry admitted March 30 that it had put up posters offering huge incentives for would-be suicide bombers if they gave up their destructive mission, ending a week long debate on who had put up the posters.

"Those posters had been put up by the Ministry of Defence and accordingly, now there is an opportunity to all would-be suicide bombers to surrender," Military Spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara told the Daily Mirror newspaper.

In response to the earlier claims by the government that the posters were not put up by any state institution, the spokesman said, "earlier we were not aware about such thing, now the ministry is confirming that posters had been put up by the ministry."

Several posters had gone up offering would-be bombers Rs. 10 million or the equivalent in US

dollars for a new life in Sri Lanka or overseas, The Daily Mirror reported on March 19.

"Why should you die with a scattered body?" the red-and-yellow posters, placed in Tamil-dominated areas of the capital, Colombo, asked readers contemplating becoming members of elite "Black Tiger" suicide squads.

"You also were born to live. Why should you carry bombs?" the posters said alongside a fuzzy black-and-white photograph of a suicide bomber's severed head.

Those contemplating becoming one of the Black Tigers are urged to change their minds and call a government operated telephone line if they have been tasked to carry out a suicide attack saying security would be provided to them if they surrendered.

The posters urged the bombers to understand that life was precious and LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran should sacri-

fice his son or daughter if he was sincere about the Tamil cause.

"Your life is precious and you have only one. Do not die for the brave words of an illusion," the poster read.

Initially both the military and police denied knowledge of the posters. "We do not know who pasted up the poster," said Mangala Dehideniya, in charge of Wellawatta Police where many of the posters were placed.

"The contents of the posters are correct, the Ministry is ready to offer that money, but after a proper investigation," Brigadier Nanayakkara said when owing up to his department's responsibility.

The posters said would-be suicide bombers who provided information were assured full confidentiality and told they could also be sent overseas with their immediate families if they so desired for security reasons.

Sri Lanka's urgent SOS to Pakistan for arms supplies

IAN S

FACED with stiff resistance from the Tamil Tigers, Sri Lanka has ordered emergency military supplies from Pakistan, according to official sources in India.

In a development noted with some concern by the Indian establishment, the Sri Lanka Army has sought 150,000 rounds of 60 mm mortar ammunition and as many hand grenades for immediate delivery, the sources said.

Sri Lanka has also requested \$25 million worth of 81 mm, 120 mm and 130 mm mortar ammunition to be delivered within a month, the sources told IANS.

General Sarath Fonseka, the Sri Lankan army chief who spent six days in India last month, has

conveyed the requirements to his Pakistani counterpart, General Ashraf Pervez Kayan.

The Pakistani military has apparently agreed to supply the ammunition on an emergency basis from its War Wastage Reserve maintained in various army depots.

The SOS comes amid escalating fighting in Sri Lanka where the military is desperately trying to gain control of areas the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam holds in the island's north.

The current fighting is concentrated mostly in the districts of Mannar, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu, which along with Kilinochchi are commonly referred to as the Vanni region, as well as in Jaffna.

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NEWS

IMF slams double-digit inflation

SRI LANKA'S double-digit inflation is not driven by runaway global crude prices but by poor economic management, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said March 30.

The Indian Ocean island nation's official year-on-year inflation rate rose to 24.0 percent in February, up from 21.6 percent in January and 7.1 percent a year earlier, reported AFP.

The government blamed the accelerating inflation on rising in global crude oil, commodity and food grain prices.

However, the IMF report that studied Sri Lanka's inflation in 2006 and 2007 found that "external shock" such as oil prices were only partly to blame, with the inflation also caused by an expansionary fiscal policy and monetary policy that was not tight enough.

"Since late 2006, Sri Lanka's inflation has increased sharply relative to other economies in the region," said the 28-page report titled "Pass-Through of External Shocks to Inflation in Sri Lanka."

"Increases in oil prices in the recent past, a common shock to most economies in the region, cannot explain most of the increase in inflation in Sri Lanka," the IMF said in its latest report on the island nation's inflation.

The study found that most of the inflation in Sri Lanka is home-grown.

"External shocks appear to explain about 25 percent of the variation in consumer prices and about 32 percent of the variation in core inflation," the IMF said.

Oil accounted for about six

percent, import prices 11 percent and the exchange rate about 10 percent, the IMF report said.

The fund concluded that "domestic shocks likely play a more significant role on inflation in Sri Lanka," indicating that better economic policies were needed to lower inflation.

"With external shock not playing a major role in influencing domestic inflation, domestic policies can be very important in containing inflation," the report said.

Sri Lanka's fiscal policy reversed sharply in 2004, when the then-government began to hire more people into the already-bloated public sector and stopped privatising loss-making state entities, which lead to higher budget deficits, reported Reuters.

In 2004, inflation, which was close to zero in the first quarter, was driven towards 20 percent by the end of the year with oil subsidies themselves being financed with central bank credit.

Despite record high inflation, the central bank held its key policy rates steady in February, keeping the overnight repurchase rate at 10.5 percent and reverse repurchase rate at 12 percent.

Analysts say however those rates are so artificially low they are meaningless, and banks base their own lending rates on short-term treasury bill rates, which are around 18.5 percent.

The central bank has said it wants to contain inflation between 10-11 percent by end this year and to curb it to 5 percent in medium term. However, the central bank would not give any defined time frame for 'medium' term.



UNP protestors shouted anti-government slogans and banged cooking utensils urging authorities to arrest inflation, which hit a record high 28.1% in March. Photo Sanka Vidanagama / AFP / Getty Images

Opposition focus is on 28% inflation

SRI LANKA'S main opposition United National Party says it is starting a protest campaign against rising prices after inflation in the country hit a new record.

"The whole of 2007 we saw increases in prices. Daily the prices increased," UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe told a meeting of the party's women's wing.

"We will carry it on, till the government responds to the people," Lanka Business Online quoted him as saying. His warning came shortly before Fitch Ratings, a rating agency, downgraded Sri Lanka's sovereign credit to B+ from BB-, saying budgets were weak, inflation was high and the

country was borrowing heavily from foreign lenders at commercial rates.

"The ratings downgrade of Sri Lanka reflects the increased vulnerability of sovereign creditworthiness to adverse shocks associated with rising inflation, persistently large fiscal deficits and worsened terms of trade due to soaring oil prices in the context of greater government recourse to commercial and market-based financing," James McCormack, Head of Asia sovereign ratings said.

In March 12-month inflation in Sri Lanka's capital hit 23.8 percent on a controversial new index from which an entire expenditure

group has been dropped.

On an older index, inflation hit a historic high of 28.1 percent.

The usually sleepy UNP has attracted criticism as one of the weakest oppositions in the country's post-independence history.

Wickremesinghe says the government gave various excuses such as the oil prices for high inflation but that has now been refuted by even the International Monetary Fund. "The latest IMF reports say, due to the printing of money the cost of living increased rapidly in 2007."

The previous inflation record of 26.1 percent was achieved in 1980 under an administration led

by Wickremesinghe's own UNP, when former president J R Jayewardene, ran the biggest deficits in the country's history helped by printed money.

A central bank with money printing powers was also created in the island in 1950 when Jayewardene was finance minister, abolishing a currency board that kept the rupee strong and inflation low.

Sri Lanka shifted to prudent economic policies which limited money printing in 1995 under then president Chandrika Kumaratunga, though an internal war undermined budgets towards the turn of the century.

Wickremesinghe himself con-

tinued low inflation policies when he ran the country in 2002 and 2003. Prudent economic policies qualified the country for cheap foreign loans from friendly governments.

But after jettisoning an economic strategy backed by the World Bank, IMF and other donor governments in 2004, Sri Lanka lost concessionary funds. Concern over human rights abuses and a delayed settlement to the internal conflict was also blocking foreign aid now.

Wickremesinghe also warned that the country was borrowing too much from commercial foreign lenders.

EDITORIAL & OPINION

TAMIL GUARDIAN

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WEDNESDAY APRIL 09, 2008 No. 370

Another Time of Need

As a humanitarian crisis unfolds, the Diaspora needs to help again.

Frustrated by determined Tamil Tiger resistance on the three northern battlefronts, the Sri Lankan military has intensified its efforts to break into the Vanni. The confident boasts of the military leadership and President Mahinda Rajapakse's right wing administration have given way to expectation management. As some Southern commentators have begun daring to point out, for all the tough talk, there are few tangible gains to show. Meanwhile, the absurd LTTE casualty figures dispensed daily by the military have begun raising laughable arithmetical contradictions for the government. In short, having hitched its political survival firmly to a warhorse, the Colombo administration is now under serious pressure. As in the past, this inevitably heralds intensified suffering for the Tamil people.

Contrary to the government's claims, the military has been making determined, if fruitless, efforts for many months to capture the Mannar region amongst others. There have been gains, but compared to what had been expected (and promised), these have been negligible; indeed, one military operation in Mannar in the late nineties took much greater territory in just a week that the present offensive has in eight months - but then, the LTTE, preparing for more strategically important moves, withdrew without resistance that time. Reports suggest that the fighting across the northern fronts is collectively many times more intense than during the ill-fated Operation Jaya Sikirui of the 'War for Peace' era. Of course, the Sri Lankan military has been significantly strengthened by the international community during the Norwegian peace process. The LTTE has also not been idle.

The indiscriminate bombardments being directed for several months towards LTTE-held parts of Mannar have intensified in recent weeks to the extent one of the major prizes of the onslaught, the Madhu church complex, is gradually being turned to rubble. The decision last week by the Mannar Diocese to relocate the revered statue of 'Our Lady of Madhu' came as it became clear that the Rajapakse administration, now desperate for territorial gains, has decided the destruction of the Church was a price worth paying. The only reason there haven't been heavy casualties amongst the thousands who had sought shelter around the long-functioning sanctuary is because they had moved out over the past two months.

However, just like previous Sri Lankan governments faced with Tamil defiance, the Rajapakse administration will intensify its punitive attacks and measures against the Vanni population. The embargo on food and medicine will be tightened further and civilian centers will be targeted more heavily. Last week health workers in Kilinochchi reported growing malnourishment amongst young children. For almost two years, Tamil villages, schools and refugee camps have been targeted by Sri Lankan airstrikes and artillery. Buses and, especially, ambulances, have been targeted by Sri Lankan commandos. These murderous tactics will also intensify. In the meantime, despite the plethora of harsh reports by international human rights groups and some Western governments, human rights abuses will worsen.

The point here is that, despite the rhetoric of human rights and so on, there will be no concrete international action to restrain the state. And all the 'Security Sector Reform' that donors fund will not change the majoritarian ethos of the Sinhala state. Nor will there be any serious international effort to alleviate the suffering of the Tamil population. International NGOs will of course continue to operate, but their actions are already woefully inadequate for the needs of the hour. As the recent history of the Eastern province demonstrated, as the conflict intensifies we can expect a scaling down, rather than an increase, in international relief. This is partly self-interest, partly subordination to strategic imperatives of donors and partly disruption by the Sri Lankan state. The systematic harassment of aid agencies by the Rajapakse administration is an integral part of the military campaign which seeks to induce war weariness amongst the Tamil people as much as destroying the LTTE's fighting capacity. So are the crackdowns on Tamil NGOs by some foreign governments.

Amid shrinking international commitment to humanitarian norms when it comes to the Tamils, the Tamil people must tend to their own needs. The Diaspora has long been the mainstay of relief efforts for the people of the Northern warzones and - more than the international community - was central to the rebuilding of the Tamil areas during the peace process. The Diaspora has been selflessly generous at times of crisis, out of proportion to its economic base.

It needs to step forward yet again.

Iconic of the times

The international rules of war decree that warring parties have an obligation to protect religious sites. However, in the context of the Sri Lanka's majoritarian drive, non-Buddhist sites have in fact been the targets and objectives of military campaigns.

J. T. Janani
 Tamil Guardian

LAST week, as shells fired by Sri Lanka Army guns only a few miles away exploded within the Madhu Church's complex, the resident priests followed the Bishop of Mannar's instructions and removed its revered statue to a safer location deeper within Vanni.

For the first time in over 300 years the presiding icon of Sri Lanka's oldest Catholic site of pilgrimage has fled before an invading army, along with her serving priests and nuns. The last time was in 1670 when the Catholic Church fled persecution by the Protestant Dutch into the Vanni jungles.

As Bishop Raiyappu Joseph lamented, "Our lady of Madhu becomes refugee in her own land".

In that way, the statue has become iconic of the entire Tamil people. Repeated Sri Lankan offensives and incessant human rights abuses over a quarter century of conflict, over a million people, almost one in three Tamils have been either internally displaced or made refugees.

Moreover, last week's relocation of 'Our lady of Madhu' is emblematic of the conflict itself.

The targeting of the revered Madhu site is just the latest act in the Sinhala-Buddhist state's persecution and marginalisation of the island's other religions. Tamil-speaking Hindus, Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, and more recently, the Muslim people have been the targets of the state's hegemonic project.

Of course, even Sinhala Christians also face persecution, with church burnings, violence against Christian NGOs and even the repeated tabling of so-called 'anti-conversion' legislation in

Parliament (last time the United States reportedly intervened to stop such laws being passed).

However, Sinhala Christians have not been caught up in the state's ethno-majoritarian onslaught in the Northeast and have not suffered the deprivations of bombardment, starvation and mass killings that the people of that region have.

This is not the first time the Madhu church has been attacked by the military: in 1999, as the Army fled before a Tamil Tiger offensive, retreating Sri Lankan tanks fired into the church complex, killing over thirty Tamil refugees.

The international rules of war decree that warring parties have an obligation to protect religious sites.

However, in the context of the state's drive to establish an ethnocracy, non-Buddhist religious sites have in fact been the targets and objectives of military campaigns.

The Sri Lankan state has, for example, militarised most of the major Hindu temples of the Northeast, constructing "High Security Zones" around them and separating worshippers, except on tightly regimented occasions by razor wire and machine guns.

Even, the present fighting in Madhu stems to a great extent from the present ultra-nationalist administration's desire to raise the Lion flag over the venerated shrine, so as to sustain its standing amongst the majority Sinhala-Buddhists who swept President Mahinda Rajapakse to power two years ago.

The Rajapakse administration has made no effort to conceal its contempt for non-Buddhists. Consider the assassination of Tamil Parliamentarian Joseph

OPINION



Pararajasingham by government-backed paramilitaries, literally at the Batticaloa church's altar in the middle of Christmas Mass in 2005. Then there was the 'disappearance' in 2006 of Father Brown in Jaffna and the shooting dead by soldiers of another Jaffna priest that year (even he, like so many innocent Tamils, had a grenade planted on him by his killers).

From the beginning of the armed conflict, Tamil churches and temples have been readily targeted by the Sinhala military (as US military academic Brian Blodgett puts it, the production of Sri Lanka's "ethnically pure" military began in 1962).

Even during the 'liberal' President Chandrika Kumaratunga's 'War for Peace' the Navy had dropped on it: almost a hundred refugees were killed in the airstrike in July 1995.

The Catholic Church has been rooted for centuries in the coastal areas of the Tamil north; particularly with the arrival in Mannar of St Francis Xavier of Portugal, circa 1645.

While militant Buddhism (as currently formulated in Sri Lanka unlike the pacifist Buddhisms practiced in the rest of Asia) - must necessarily clash with the Christian Church on ideological lines, there is another reason why the Church of the Northeast must come into confrontation with the Sinhala state.

The Church of Our Lady of Madhu, like many other places of worship across the Northeast have given shelter to waves of refugees throughout the conflict. The Mannar site has been one of the longest-functioning sanctuaries during the war.

In a war characterised by the

state engaged in collective punishment through mass displacement, starvation by embargo and 'scorched earth' offensives (as conducted once again in the Eastern province during 2006-7), the Northeastern Church has sought to alleviate the very suffering and deprivation the state seeks to inflict.

And in terms of a majoritarian state trying to crush the Tamils and their struggle for liberation, the Catholic Church's ideological stances on key issues, including social justice and collective rights, brings it inevitably into confrontation with the Sinhala state.

The Social mandate of the Catholic Church is enunciated quite clearly in the Vatican publication, "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church" which was summarised by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter, Tertio Millennio Adveniente (the Third Millennium).

The Social Doctrine deals comprehensively with the social issues of our time, with chapters entitled, "The Right to work", "The Rights of Workers", "Private Initiative and Business Initiative", "Foundation and Purpose of the Political Community", "The International Community" among others.

Perhaps the most illuminating in the context of the Tamil struggle are the chapters entitled "Political Authority" and "Human Rights".

Para 157 notes that "The Magisterium points out that international law 'rests upon the principle of equal respect for States, for each people's right to self-determination and for their free cooperation in view of the higher common good of humanity'. [327] Peace is founded not

only on respect for human rights but also on respect for the rights of peoples, in particular the right to independence. [328]"

A nation has a "fundamental right to existence", to "its own language and culture, through which a people expresses and promotes ... its fundamental spiritual 'sovereignty'", to "shape its life according to its own traditions, excluding, of course, every abuse of basic human rights and in particular the oppression of minorities",

Para 504 of the Social Doctrine says: "The right to use force for purposes of legitimate defence is associated with the duty to protect and help innocent victims who are not able to defend themselves from acts of aggression."

Consequently, the persecution of the Church by an authoritarian, ethno-majoritarian state, engaged in a systematic and broad-fronted onslaught against non-Sinhala-Buddhist communities should come as no surprise.

Of course, while the Catholic tradition, rooted in the Vatican and the living presence of the Pope, is itself under no threat due to the war in Sri Lanka, the Saivite Siddhanta tradition of Jaffna's Hindus is unique, rooted in the ancient Tamil city and, under the onslaught of the majoritarian state, very much at risk of extinction.

And, as it turns, out the tradition migrated, to be preserved independently of the political fortunes of the Tamil state of Eelam, its home for millennia.

In contrast to Catholicism, there is no single organised Hindu authority: there are only an independent set of historic temples which follow the Saivite

tradition.

The acknowledged religious leader of the Northeastern Hindus is Jaffna's Yoga Swami, whose Saiva Siddhanta sect claims its spiritual lineage from an unbroken 2000-year old line of preceptors originating in the Himalayas.

Even as the Tamil refugees fled to the West in the eighties and nineties, the leading preceptor of Jaffna's Hindu tradition had already laid the foundation to move the spiritual centre of the Saivite tradition to the West, their new home: in 1970 Yoga Swami, presciently as it turns out, ordained as his successor, a 22 year old American (known as Subramuniya Swami), instructing him explicitly to take his faith abroad and found a Saiva Siddhanta. It was established in Hawaii soon after.

This decision arose out of the Saivite Hindus' very different approach to temples, spirituality and death. The Hindus believe that the temple is the connector between the material world and the spiritual world of their gods, a connection being maintained through meditation and the rituals of Puja.

For the faith to stay alive, the connection must be maintained unbroken at some location in the world, it matters not where.

And in the temple of Siva in Hawaii founded by Subramuniya Swami, the priests have chanted prayers in Tamil and Sanskrit in an unbroken timeline for 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, ever since 1973.

Subramuniya Swami's choice of America as a refuge for the Saivite tradition is no accident for as even he points out: "Our constitution guarantees religious freedom."

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan ethno-majoritarian state sees its war against non-Sinhala-Buddhists challengers as a campaign 'In defence of the Dharma' as Tessa Bartholomeuz's detailed study of the state's military practices is titled.

However, Sri Lanka's conflict is not a strictly a 'religious war'.

The LTTE, which spearheads the Tamils' struggle for self-determination, is a secular organisation. It is not fighting to protect Hinduism or any other religion per se. Rather it is fighting to establish the secular state of Tamil Eelam in which all religions will be treated equally - unlike in Sri Lanka where Buddhism has 'a first and foremost place' as the Constitution itself makes clear.

Indeed, the Tamils have long separated state and religion, from at least the Sangam era, as is clear from the copious literature of the era, including the Thirukkural.

The Tamils of the Sangam age (ca. 200 BCE to 200 CE) practiced three main religions - Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Scholars find the society tolerant towards all religions, with the monarchs themselves openly encouraged religious discussions, protecting the temples and monasteries of all sects and religions, irrespective of the doctrines they themselves

believed in.

Today, as the international community continues to insist on a political solution to Sri Lanka's conflict, they do so with a misunderstanding of the logic inherent in the state's efforts to militarily crush the Tamil struggle for liberation.

The international analysis of Sri Lanka as a flawed democracy trying to defeat terrorism while attempting to build a liberal state stems from the international actors' own hopes for this goal.

However the evidence to challenge this analysis is copious and ubiquitous, should international actors choose to look.

For example, why did Buddhism, despite very few of the minorities practicing it, come to be enshrined in the Constitution as having a 'first and foremost' place?

How did an interpretation of history which sees the Tamils as interlopers crushed and disciplined by Sinhala kings who were both valiant and devout Buddhists, come to become standard text in schools?

Why are temples and churches attacked with abandon by the military whilst Buddhist temples and statues are rapidly erected in areas conquered by the military?

Why are the Sri Lanka Army's regiments (remember Sri Lanka is supposed to be a multi-ethnic state and polity) named after Sinhala kings said to have conquered the Tamils in the past?

Why, amid the supposedly secular nature of the state, are Buddhist rituals daily practices of the military and, for that matter, the official functions of state?

All the island's inhabitants know precisely why. The answer lies at the heart of the Sri Lankan state and nation building project as conceived by the Sinhala-Buddhists.

Thus, terrorism for the Sri Lankan state is essentially resistance to Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony.

That is why journalists, academics, civil society activists and, yes, priests who challenge the state's majoritarian practices are condemned as supporters of terrorism and become targets for murderous violence. (It is also why even the senior UN official Sir John Holmes could be denounced by the government as a terrorist, without much consternation or embarrassment amongst the Sinhalese).

Until the international community takes a close look at the logic informing the practices of the Sri Lankan state and Sinhala politics, the conflict will remain inexplicable at best and 'senseless violence' at worst.

More importantly, until the international community is prepared to confront and smash the Sinhala-Buddhist project, there will be no peace in Sri Lanka.

The Tamils are not going to accept a subordinate place in a Sinhala chauvinist order that has accorded itself a privileged position as overlords of the island.

Not even if every non-Buddhist place of worship in the Northeast is razed to the ground.

As shells rain down, Our Lady of Madhu becomes a 'refugee in her own land'

THE highly venerated statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also known as 'Our Lady of Madhu', was removed from one of Sri Lanka's most revered catholic shrines for the first time in more than four centuries because of intensifying fighting.

Meanwhile the Sacred Heart Church in the Madhu Shrine complex was completely destroyed by Sri Lankan Army shelling.

Bishop of Mannar, Rev. Dr. Rayappu Joseph, told TamilNet Thursday that he had instructed the remaining four reverend priests, four reverend sisters and five civilian assistants to flee the premises of the Madhu Church with the statue of Our Lady.

"This is the first time Our Lady of Madhu becomes refugee in her own land," the Mannar Bishop said. "She has been giving shelter to IDPs. In 1990, she gave shelter to 36,000 IDPs."

Bishop Rayappu Joeshp has instructed the priests to relocate the statue to a safer area together with them.

The statue was taken from the Madhu shrine by three priests to Thevayanpiddy in Vellankumam for its protection, Bishop Joseph said.

Thevayanpiddy is situated along the coastal Road to Jaffna from Mannar.

The bishop of Mannar said people who were sheltering at the

shrine had also fled and referring to the statue he said "our lady had to go with them"

"We are going to take it to a safer location, we cannot allow it to remain there as it is our treasure," he said.

"We asked the government to declare Madhu as a war free zone. The president agreed but it was not given in writing. If the government has agreed to have a peace zone then I think the LTTE would have honoured it. This is what TamilSelvan told me and Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith", said the Bishop.

The Sacred Heart Church was destroyed in the Madhu Army shelling after the priests had taken away the statue of Our Lady of Madhu last Thursday, reveal photographs taken by K. Baskaran, a photographer who visited the church on Sunday.

"Any desecration of Madhu is likely to be understood as an effort of the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism to erase out the symbols of other religions and thus serving a spiritual blow which is the most dreaded stage in the process of ethnic cleansing," Vanni District Parliamentarian Selvam Adaikalanathan told TamilNet Tuesday.

"The social and cultural formation of Tamil Christianity, especially the Tamil Catholicism, is about 500-years old. Madu

Church is the foremost symbol of this phenomenon. It is also looked upon with the same feeling by the Sinhala Catholicism of the western coast which was once part of the Tamil Catholic identity," the MP, who is a Catholic hailing from Vidathalththeevu in Mannar, told TamilNet.

This is the second time the Sacred Heart Chapel comes under SLA attack, the MP said.

None years ago, on 20th November, 1999, Sri Lanka Army troops, numbering around 300, who had taken up positions in the environs of Madhu church allegedly fired shells from their tanks, killing 33 Tamil refugees on the spot inside the Sacred Heart Chapel.

Four victims died later at the hospital, among the more than 60 wounded. Twelve of the killed were children below 18. More than 3000 IDPs had taken refuge in the precincts of Madhu shrine at that time.

Two months ago, on 29 January 2008, 20 civilians including 11 school children were killed when Sri Lanka Army Deep Penetration Unit triggered off a claymore mine target a civilian bus close to the Madhu shrine.

The shrine at Madhu is a pilgrimage site for over six percent of Sri Lanka's Catholics. But now

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SRI LANKA ARMY BOMBARDS FAMOUS MADHU CHURCH



Clockwise from top left: The Madhu Church, reconstructed after the 2002 Ceasefire, has been shelled by Sri Lankan forces before, in 1999; the statue of Jesus didn't escape the shrapnel when the Army shelled the Sacred Heart Church of the Madu Shrine complex last week; shattered pews are a reminder of the killing of over thirty Tamil refugees in 1999 when Army tanks fired at the building; the statue of Our Lady of Madhu pictured with one of the priests who escorted it to another location in the Vanni. Photos TamilNet



The temporal and spiritual conquest of the Tamils

TamilNet

MORE than security concerns, the sentiments of Tamil Christians and their mistrust of Sri Lankan State seem to be the impelling force behind the decision of taking away Our Lady of Madu from her abode. Those who could look at how Kathirikaamam was confiscated from the predominance of Tamils and how the ancient temples behind the Tamil Saiva myth are inside 'High Security Zones', could understand the fear of Tamil Christians. The question is whether the International Community and India, which contribute to the military option, don't understand or don't want to understand the fact that if there is anything to be defeated militarily in Sri Lanka, it is the chauvinism of the Sri Lankan State.

Our Lady of Madu has become a refugee in her own land, the Bishop of Mannar said on Thursday.

To a Tamil mind it reminds of the plight of the two chief deities of Tamil Saivism and Vaishnavism, who had to be carried away to escape vandalism at the hands of the Muslim rulers of medieval times.

Arangan (Sri Ranganaathar of Sri Rangam) had to flee to Thiruppathi, Saligramam and Chegnchi and Ampalavan (Nadaraja of Chithamparam) had to find sanctuary in Thiruvavaroor.

It took a pan south Indian resistance movement to reinstate Arangan and there rooted the birth of Vijayanagara Empire.

The Tamil identity is secular. It doesn't have any particular religion. Tamil served the medium for all the major religions of the world since very old times, which is a unique attribute to a language and the identity associated with it.

To a Tamil mind, the self-respect of one's freedom to follow any faith in his or her language and cultural context is what that matters.

Tamil Christianity in Sri Lanka today is an integral part of Eezham Tamil identity.

Contrary to the impression of many, Christianity hasn't come into Tamil heritage with the advent of the Portuguese. It had come long before, almost at the time of the birth of Christianity in West Asia. It made an impact and survived in the old Tamil society, the descendants of which are the Syrian Christians of Malabar.

When the Roman Catholic

faith came along with the Portuguese to Asia, Mannaar, associated with the activities of St. Francis Xavier, was one of the first centres - a Tamil Christian centre, established through martyrdom.

For centuries, the Tamil Christian heritage of Mannaar has evolved its own culture, literature, art forms etc.

The origin of the icon of Our Lady of Madu, go back to the times of the advent of Catholic Christianity in Mannaar.

In the 16th century, the image, which was then known as Our Lady of Good Health, was in a church at Maanthai.

The persecution of Catholics by the Dutch in the 17th century made her worshippers to carry her deep into Vanni in the year 1670.

She was kept at a place Marutha-madu (meaning, the deep tank in the locality of Maruthu / Terminalia arjuna trees), which at that time was in the border of the territories of the king of Kandy. The settlement soon received further Catholic refugees from Jaffna, fleeing Dutch persecutions.

A lady among the latter group called Santa Lena (St Helena) built a humble church for the statue, which then became Our Lady of Madu.

Over the centuries Madu became the most important pilgrim centre for Catholics, both Tamils and Sinhalese, throughout Sri Lanka.

Many, who have not grasped the undercurrents, may wonder at the necessity to carry the image when the church is a pan Sri Lankan pilgrim centre. They may ask whether the Sri Lankan state is incapable of protecting it.

Of course there is insecurity in wartime, especially when having a State with credentials of committing destruction to Christian and Hindu places of worship.

But, more than the fear of destruction, the pricking question now it seems, is the attempt of Sinhala nation to confiscate pilgrim sites, and Sinhalicise them, to deal with myths counter to it.

Most of the Sinhala Catholics, who make pilgrimage to Madu, were Tamils three or four generations ago. They come from the coastal areas of Northwestern and Western Provinces. All along the western coast, up to Colombo,

Continued on p14

LTTE urges Norway to act over assault on revered shrines

LIBERATION Tigers Political Head B. Nadesan on April 7 sent an urgent letter to Norwegian International Development Minister Erik Solheim, placing a request to the Royal Norwegian Government to take steps to immediately end the military assault of the holy Madu shrine in Mannar district.

"The international community together with the international institutions that are concerned about protecting the historical treasures of the world must be brought together and we hope the Royal Norwegian Government together with them will take the necessary actions to end the attacks on the church," Mr. Nadesan urged Norway.

"We write to share with you our view about the zeal exhibited by the Sri Lankan State to destroy the Madhu church, a historically significant shrine revered by the entire Tamil nation," the letter said.

"You are, of course, aware of the Sri Lankan State's year long, large

scale military onslaught against us with the view to occupy Vanni. The world is also aware that the Sri Lankan State's military onslaughts are targeting the historical Madhu church in the Mannar district, the western region of Vanni.

"The Madhu church is a centuries old shrine revered by the Tamil people of all religions. That is why the Madhu church complex has been a place of refuge for people of all religions. This church has become a symbol of inter religious amity and goodwill among the Tamils," the letter pointed out.

"The Sri Lankan State armed forces have directed their artillery fire incessantly towards this church over the last few weeks. Such a revered church that symbolizes inter religious tolerance was identified as a military target by the Sri Lankan State and it is being subjected to military onslaught. Yet, the international community has failed to stop or even condemn this atrocity. Tamil

people are shocked by this silence of the international community," Mr. Nadesan noted.

"The Sri Lankan military is using Multi-Barrel-Rocket-Launchers, artillery, mortar, and tanks to assault this holy shrine. Tragically, due to this indiscriminate military assaults, thousands of people who took refuge in the holy shrine complex and the church priests were forced displace from the complex together with the statue of Mother Mary of the Madhu church.

"Part of the shrine is already damaged by the Sri Lankan military attacks. There is continued danger that the church will sustain further damage because the Sri Lankan military is persisting with its onslaught.

"We would like to place a request through you, who is looked upon by the Tamil people as a peace envoy, to the Royal Norwegian Government to take steps to immediately end the military assault of the holy Madhu shrine," the letter said.

"The international community together with the international institutions that are concerned about protecting the historical treasures of the world must be brought together and we hope the Royal Norwegian Government together with them will take the necessary actions to end the attacks on the church.

"The Sinhala State, which shows great keenness to protect Buddhist symbols and Buddhist temples, which shows great keenness to build new Buddhist temples in the Tamil areas that they occupy, is also vehement on destroying the religious symbols of other religions, thus hurting the feelings of people who follow other religions.

"As far as our movement and our people are concerned we continue to accept the facilitation role of the Royal Norwegian Government. As such we believe that we have a right to place such a request to them.

"We, therefore, ask you to urge the Royal Norwegian Government,

with the help of the international community to stop the Sri Lankan State's military assault on a revered shrine of the people of Tamil Eelam," Mr. Nadesan's letter said.

Earlier Mr. Nadesan had issued a statement strongly condemning the indiscriminate shelling on the Madu Church and urging the International Community and Human Rights organizations to condemn the Government of Sri Lanka for 'barbarically' transforming a sacred shrine that offered refuge to displaced people into a battlefield.

He criticized the government for unleashing its army on an area that was ought to be free of war according to war ethics and UN conventions. "Sinhalese armed forces are indiscriminately shelling the vicinity of the Madu Shrine and thus turning a shrine sacred to the Catholics into a battlefield. The Liberation Tigers vehemently condemn the Sri Lankan Government for giving a free reign to its army and unleashing it in an

area that should be free of hostilities according to warfare ethics and UN conventions."

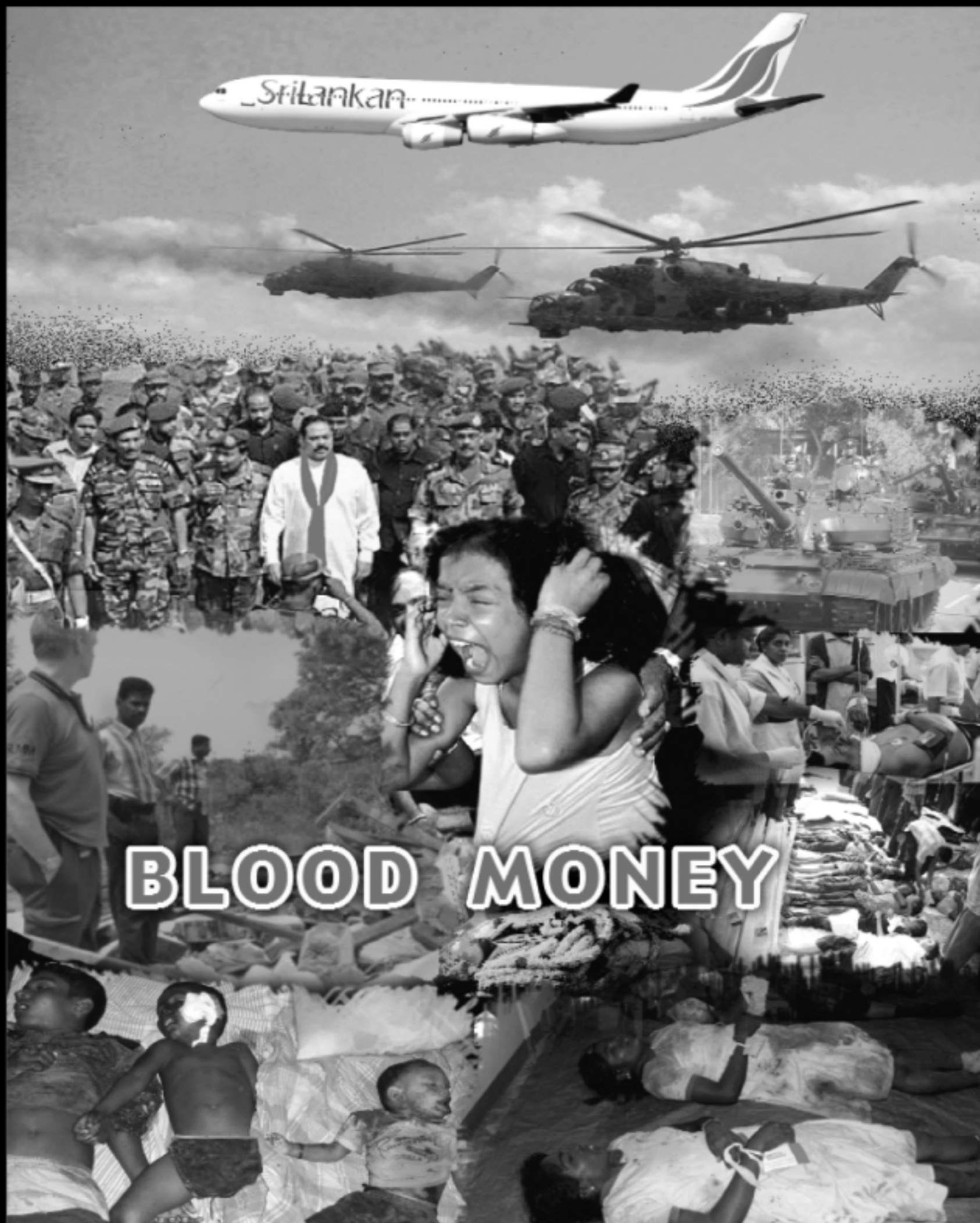
The Tiger Political Head termed as "barbaric" the Sinhalese government's act of making a war zone out of the Madu Shrine that provided refuge to thousands of internally displaced people. He recalled that in 1998, "invading Sinhalese troops had fired from armoured tanks laying siege to the Madu Shrine and killed more than 30 people, including children, women and the aged, who had sought refuge there."

Likewise, on February 29, 2008, a Sri Lanka Army claymore attack on schoolchildren travelling across the premises of the Shrine left 18 people, schoolchildren and civilians, dead. "The Sinhalese armed forces that cause danger to the people has imp-osed yet another atrocity on them. Once again, the Sri Lankan government is striving to transform the sacred area of the Madu Shrine into a war zone."



The sacred statue (left) was taken by priests and nuns from the Madhu shrine to Thevayanpiddy in Vellankulam along the route shown on the map. Graphics courtesy Daily Mirror

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BRITISH TAMILS FORUM

NEWS

Elections are quicker than resettlement for Tamils in East

Amantha Perera
IPS

IN the last one year Sri Lanka's eastern Batticaloa district has seen two rounds of mass displacements as hundreds of thousands of people fled warfare between Tamil militants and the armed forces of the country.

In late 2006 and early 2007, frightened civilians, mostly ethnic Tamils, fled their homes in areas held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as the Sri

Election have been held, but the people still suffer from a chronic lack of basic facilities such as proper roads, regular electricity, housing, schools and medical facilities.

Lankan army fought its way in to dislodge the militants.

As the government forces gained more and more LTTE territory, they also began a massive resettlement plan to get the internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their villages.

So far, over 104,000 of the IDPs have been resettled in areas regained by government forces such as Vavunathivu and Vakara, according to the ministry of resettle-

ment and disaster relief services.

Of those displaced until mid-March, last year, a little over 18,000 remain to be resettled.

The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse emphasised the reestablishment of its writ in the entire district by holding local body elections on Mar. 10 - though this was marred by the fact that the main opposition parties boycotted it.

And now the resettled civilians are demanding action from the newly elected local bodies.

"All my life I have been running, either from bullets or from shells. I have never been able to talk of a future," Sellan Sundaralingam, 49, and a father of three grown up daughters, told IPS in Vavuniathivu where 27,000 persons have been resettled.

Despite the mass returns, the villagers say that they still suffer from a chronic lack of basic facilities like proper roads, regular electricity, housing, schools and medical facilities.

"I still live in an abandoned house," Sundaralingam said.

Battered by decades of conflict, these newly resettled areas, mostly west of the famous Batticaloa lagoon have dirt track roads pockmarked by craters created by shell fire.

School buildings are defaced and roofs and walls have been blown away by stray shells.

Kumaradass Nesamalar had hoped to rebuild his house with the Rs 250,000 (2,318 US dollars)



Some Tamils have been resettled in the East, but amid a lack of basic amenities and continuing concerns over security as Army-backed paramilitaries abduct and murder at will, elections are planned.

that he received as tsunami relief.

"I was hit by the tsunami, my house was destroyed, but I was unable to repair it," the 38-year-old father of five children said. "Now the money is gone... spent on surviving the fighting."

Despite relative calm since last July, most of the newly resettled people bear the effects of having lived most of their lives under the barrel of a gun.

"The last few months have been good, there has been no war, no fighting and we have lived better," Nesamalar said. "The harvest has been good and so is the fishing, but who knows what will happen tomorrow."

Villagers living in locations like Vavunathivu, Vakara and Karadiyanaru, strongholds of the Tigers less than a year back, say their lives have been dictated by conflict for as long as they can

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Hundreds of Tamil children malnourished

Daily Mirror

HUMANITARIAN agencies say hundreds of children in the North are suffering from severe malnutrition, with essential supplies, including therapeutic food supplements given to severely malnourished children, yet to reach them.

According to the Kilinochchi District Hospital, more than 500 children below the age of five in the Kilinochchi District, suffer from severe malnutrition.

Nutrition screening in Jaffna has identified a further 407 children suffering from 3 SD or Severe Acute Malnutrition, a UN affiliated agency said.

The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) quoted the Kilinochchi District Secretary as saying that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) had not given permission to transport food items for consumption by the general public, through the Omanthai crossing into Kilinochchi, in the months of February and March.

"MPCSs report that food stocks in the district are running low. Wheat flour shortages have been reported from some villages in the north-east of Kilinochchi District," IASC said.

"The Regional Divisional Health Services office in Kilinochchi reports that no MoD permission had been given to bring in essential drugs from the stores in Vavuniya for the first quarter of the year," the agency added.

"This is further exacerbating the lack of essential medicines in

government run medical facilities," the IASC said.

The Kilinochchi District Secretary reports that 4,025 acres of paddy that was ready for harvesting had been destroyed by floods brought on by unseasonal rains.

Meanwhile, the Jaffna RDHS had forwarded a supply request, through the Director General of Health Services in Colombo, for the supply of BP 100, in order that the Nutrition Rehabilitation Programme may continue, as stocks were running low. BP 100

More than 500 children below the age of five in Kilinochchi suffer from severe malnutrition

is the therapeutic food supplement used for severely malnourished children.

"Nutrition screening identified 407 children to have 3 SD," IASC said.

In January, a UNICEF consignment of BP 100 destined for malnourished children in the north, was seized after the government claimed the high protein biscuits were used by combatants as rations.

Though the stocks were subsequently released to UNICEF, staff at the agency fear the delay to get the consignment to Kilinochchi may have contributed to the malnutrition. The Military was not available for comment.

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NEWS



Sri Lankan troops were sent back from Haiti after sexual abuse allegations, including rape and child prostitution, that have now been verified by the UN Photo Sanka Vidanagama / AFP / Getty Images

UN confirms sex charges against Sri Lankan troops

THE UN is to charge 114 Sri Lankan soldiers who were on peacekeeping missions with sexual exploitation and abuse against children, the Sunday Times reported last week.

The UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) says it is assisting in the pending legal proceedings initiated by the Sri Lankan Government, to ensure that all military members found guilty, according to Sri Lankan law, 'are held accountable for their actions.'

The UN says charges should include rape - because it involves children under 18 years of age - which constitutes a 'war crime' in the context of military conflicts.

After an investigation into pending charges against Sri Lankan troops in Haiti, the OIOS has concluded that "acts of sexual exploitation and abuse (against children) were frequent and occurred usually at night, and at virtually every location where the contingent personnel were deployed," the paper said.

"In exchange for sex, the children received small amounts of money, food, and sometimes mobile phones," says the OIOS, the UN's investigative arm.

At the time of the initial allegation last November, Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa asserted, when commenting on the Sri Lankan armed forces and their peace keeping missions, that, "I respect them profoundly and consider them as the most disciplined Forces in the world. They have not killed or raped anybody."

The charges of sexual exploitation have been made against 114 members of the Sri Lankan

armed forces who were serving as peacekeepers in the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).

They were part of a larger 950-member Sri Lankan contingent in the politically-troubled Caribbean nation.

Virtually all of the 114 troops were repatriated last November on 'disciplinary grounds'.

The repatriation, described as one of the biggest single withdrawals of soldiers from a UN peacekeeping mission, was done in close cooperation with the Sri

The UN concluded that acts of sexual exploitation and abuse against children were frequent and occurred usually at night, and at virtually every location where the Sri Lankan personnel were deployed.

Lankan Government.

Three officers, a Lt. Colonel and two Majors who were Company Commanders, were withdrawn for failure to exercise command responsibilities in accordance with military norms and standards.

The UN may also seek the assistance of the Sri Lankan government to help provide compensation to victims of the crime.

The UN said the actions Col-

ombo takes against them would also determine whether the UN will deploy Sri Lankan soldiers in future peacekeeping operations, the Sunday Times reported when the troops were ejected from Haiti.

A UN source told the paper that the Department of Peacekeeping Operations would monitor what action the government proposed to take against the soldiers.

"If they are found guilty, they should be punished for their crimes under the criminal justice system in the country," he said.

The UN would be very unhappy, he said, if only administrative and disciplinary actions were taken against the soldiers.

Sri Lankan military Spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara said "Investigations are still going on. Our team is also looking into it. If they are found guilty they will be punished accordingly."

In 2001, the year before a ceasefire ended the fighting, Amnesty International said it "has noted a marked rise in allegations of rape by [Sri Lankan] police, army and navy personnel."

"Among the victims of rape by the security forces are many internally displaced women, women who admit being or having been members of the LTTE and female relatives of members or suspected male members of the LTTE," Amnesty said.

"Reports of rape in custody concern children as young as 14," Amnesty also said.

Amnesty said "to [our] knowledge, not a single member of the Sri Lankan security forces has

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NEWS

In Sri Lanka, fear of being 'disappeared' haunts Tamils

Emily Wax
Washington Post

UNDER thick tropical rains on a rutted country road, a bus packed with ethnic Tamil families screeched to a stop here in eastern Sri Lanka. At a heavily fortified government checkpoint, the families were ordered off the bus.

They were asked many questions. Where had they come from? Why? Whom did they visit?

The experience, for many of them, was more than inconvenient. It was frightening.

In places like this, they said, amid bungalows battered and burned by war, people go missing.

"It's not waiting in the lines or the search of our bags that troubles us as much as the chances of being picked out, arrested and never being able to see our families again," said a 19-year-old Tamil waiter, who was too fearful of government reprisal to offer his name.

'President Rajapaksa is going to be very confrontational. He doesn't need the West. He doesn't need to worry about human rights'

"I know neighbors it's happened to. If you are Tamil in Sri Lanka, your trust has been spoiled. You fear Tigers and you fear the government, too."

This country's war against ethnic Tamil Tigers has grinded on for a quarter-century.

But under a recent military offensive to wipe out the Tamil Tigers, government forces have abducted hundreds of members of the Tamil group, including civilians, according to human rights groups.

Many of the "disappeared" never turn up again.

The government denies that abductions have become widespread and says heightened vigilance at checkpoints is necessary - even if Tamils complain of ethnic profiling.

Authorities cite the danger of suicide bombings, like one that killed more than a dozen people, including members of a high school baseball team, in February.

But rights activists say President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his lieutenants are intent on elim-

inating the separatist insurgency known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, no matter the cost.

They also say Sri Lanka's growing ties with Iran, China and Russia have emboldened the government to ignore criticism from the US and other Western powers.

Rajapaksa "has a simple message - that the LTTE are terrorists and he's going to be very, very confrontational," said Jehan Perera of the independent National Peace Council of Sri Lanka in Colombo, the capital.

"He doesn't need the West. He doesn't need to worry about human rights."

Abductions are carried out in various ways, according to activists and relatives of those who have disappeared.

Sometimes Tamil men of fighting age are rounded up at checkpoints, hurried into white vans and never heard from again.

Sometimes they are arrested with little explanation in house-to-house raids at night.

Regardless of the method, the disappearances often leave deep economic and psychological wounds on Tamil families.

With her five grandchildren at her side, G.H. Mithralatha, a 75-year-old Tamil, said her 42-year-old son was working at a local harbor as a driver last year when police arrived on the scene.

Without explanation, she said, they bundled him away. The family has not heard from him again, despite frequent visits to the police. The children's mother left to be a housemaid in Kuwait.

"I'm suffering so much with these children to care for," Mithralatha, whose body is frail and back is hunched, said as she wept.

The grandchildren range in age from 2 to 14. "I wish we could find their father."

In its annual human rights report, released in March, the U.S. State Department said the Sri Lankan government's "respect for human rights continued to decline due in part to the escalation of the armed conflict."

The report cited near-daily extrajudicial killings in the government-controlled Jaffna peninsula and accounts of the army, police and pro-government paramilitary groups participating in



Grandchildren comfort Mithralatha, whose son was taken by police *Photo courtesy The Washington Post*

Number of missing Tamils rising rapidly, say rights groups

As violence surges in Sri Lanka, so does the number of abductions and 'disappearance' of Tamils - mostly men, say human rights activists and aid groups.

Raymond Thibodeaux
Voice of America

SOLI CHANA, 23, is trying to find out what happened to her husband. Witnesses say three men in civilian clothes stopped him, not far from his house in Vanuniya in central Sri Lanka. They handcuffed him, shoved in a plain white van and sped away. That was a year and a half ago. He has not been heard from since.

"She is shocked and upset, [very] upset. She made complaint to the police, the Red Cross, the Human Rights Commission and ICRC [Red Cross/Crescent] also," Chana said. "All they can say is, 'We will search.'"

Thousands of other families across Sri Lanka are doing the same - making the rounds at human rights agencies to find family members who have disappeared.

The missing and the families left behind, most of them left struggling, impoverished without their breadwinners, are caught up in a growing list of atrocities being committed by both sides of this 25-year conflict between the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan government and Tamil militants, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The US government, and others, say the LTTE is a terrorist organization.

The numbers of the disappeared are in dispute by the Sri La-

nkan government, but human rights groups and foreign observer say that thousands of mostly Tamil men have been abducted in the past decade and remain missing.

Palitha Kohona is Sri Lanka's foreign affairs minister. He says the government is sincere in trying to locate those who have disappeared.

He says the numbers are being exaggerated by Tamil activists and international aid agencies to tarnish the government's human rights record.

Kohona says he helped investigate the disappearance of 355 people from list that an American diplomat recently handed to him.

"To us, one person disappearing is one too many," Kohona said.

"When you have 355 it is a matter of serious concern. But, in that list, when we went through the list, there were some repetitions in it. There were 23 in that list whom we have located, up to now, and they are well and kicking. And, there are others whose names are suspiciously similar to those recorded by our immigration authorities as people who have left the country."

He says nearly half of the 355 people on the list were accounted for and that authorities are continuing their investigation.

Father Henry Miller is a Jesuit priest who has a list of eight-thousand people - mostly young Tamil men - who have been abducted in the past decade. He says most of them are still missing.

He says the Sri Lankan government is touting a recent election here as a sign that democracy is flourishing in a part of the country once controlled by the LTTE.

The winner of that election - the first here in 14 years - was an supposedly-less-militarized political split-off of the LTTE, known as the Tamil Makkal Vidutalaip Pullikal.

For some, their victory could usher in a new era of trust between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil community.

But Father Miller is skeptical. He says the TMVP is merely a proxy party of the government.

"And, now the government can say we have restored self-government to the people of the Batticaloa District and it has not been done," Miller said.

"This is the government's program. And, with this they proclaim to the world that they have liberated and restored democratic government to the people of Batticaloa. It is a falsity."

Father Miller says that, in the government's ongoing attempt to control Tamil militants, they treat all Tamils as potential terrorists.

He says that, with the civil war flaring up once again in the Tamil-dominated north, that is not likely to change anytime soon.

A March report issued by the US State Department cited almost daily extrajudicial killings and attacks against civilians by the army, paramilitaries and pro-government militias in the government-controlled Jaffna Peninsula.

Continued on p15

NEWS

IFJ demands release of Tissanayagam

THE International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) issued a press release demanding the immediate release of journalist J.S. Tissanayagam, who has been held without charge by Sri Lanka's Terrorism Investigation Division.

According to the Free Media Movement (FMM), an IFJ affiliate, Tissanayagam, the editor of www.outreachlk.wordpress.com and a columnist for the Sunday Times, was detained by five TID officers who searched his home on March 7.

Three journalists working for the website, E-Kwality printing press owner B. Jasiharan, who writes for outreach.com, and a relative of Jasiharan were also arrested on March 7 and 8.

A Colombo magistrate's court released the three journalists, Kithsiri Wijesingae, Ranga Lasantha and Udayanan, as well as

Jasiharan's relative, Mr Kumara, on March 19. Jasiharan is reportedly still in detention.

On March 26, Tissanayagam filed a fundamental rights petition to the Supreme Court claiming his unwarranted arrest is based on anti-Tamil ethnic discrimination with no legal basis.

He also reported that the conduct of the TID officers was cruel and degrading without proper regard for his serious eye condition, a violation of his rights guaranteed and protected under Sri Lanka's Constitution.

Tissanayam's wife reports that he has been denied access to a lawyer.

"To detain journalists, media workers and anyone without charge or explanation and then deny them access to legal representation is a serious violation of basic human rights," said IFJ Asia-

Pacific Director Jacqueline Park.

"The message is simple: release Tissanayagam immediately."

The IFJ called on Sri Lanka's Supreme Court to uphold the petition filed by Tissanayagam and ensure that all parties are granted their constitutional rights to legal representation and released immediately if no due cause for arrest can be shown.

The "Stop the War on Journalists in Sri Lanka" campaign, launched by the IFJ on March 28 and involving 40 press freedom and human rights organisations from around the world, has demanded intervention by President Mahinda Rajapaksa to protect all journalists in Sri Lanka, including Tissanayagam.

A Global Day of Action for the protection of journalists in Sri Lanka, organised by the IFJ, will be held on April 10.

Sri Lanka seeks fresh oil supplies from Iran

Lanka Business Online

SRI LANKA is seeking to renew its long-term crude oil supply contract with Iran and wrap up financing to expand its refinery during a visit this week by senior government officials to Teheran.

Treasury Secretary P B Jayasundera and Ashantha de Mel, chairman of the state-oil refiner Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC), are to hold talks with Iranian government and oil industry officials.

De Mel told Lanka Business Online that during his visit the CPC will renew its contract to buy crude oil from Iran, the island's main supplier of crude.

"We want to sign an agreement to buy crude for the next one year because the existing contract has expired and we need to re-sign it."

They will also discuss plans to double the capacity at the 50,000 barrels per day CPC refinery at Sapugaskanda, north of Colombo, which can now refine only about half the island's requirement.

Iran has promised to help modernise the refinery with funding and technical expertise.

The total project is expected to cost 1.2 billion dollars with Iran funding 80 percent of the cost and the CPC the balance.

Iranian experts have already begun a feasibility study on the project.

"We want to discuss the details of the refinery expansion with our Iranian counterparts," de Mel said. "We need to start the expansion as quickly as possible."

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is to visit Sri Lanka around April 20.

De Mel also said the CPC had just imported its third consignment of crude oil under an Iranian credit line.

The CPC had now bought 3.5 million barrels of crude under the credit line which gives the corporation seven months to pay, the first four months interest free and another three months at half a percent above the London inter-bank offered rate.

The CPC imports about a million barrels of crude a month.

The temporal and spiritual...

Continued from p9

there were traditional villages of Tamil Christians.

Their Sinhalisation was systematic, abetted by an ingenious scheme of disruption of communication. The closing down of the traditional coastal highway between Colombo and Mannar / Jaffna, in the guise of the Wilpattu sanctuary, cut down the contiguity.

What happened in the western coast is actually the forerunner to what happened and what is happening to the geographical contiguity of Tamils in the East.

Through a state orchestrated process, involving competition for fishing grounds, the third generation not only became Sinhal-

ese but also anti Tamil. The churches, which until recent times conducted masses in Tamil, switched over entirely to Sinhala, signifying a wedge between Tamil and Sinhala Christianity.

The matter didn't stop there. The Sinhala Buddhists have not accepted them fully, just because they speak Sinhala. Frictions are not uncommon in this part of the Island.

More than security concerns, the sentiments of Tamil Christians and their mistrust of Sri Lankan State seem to be the impelling force behind the decision of taking away Our Lady of Madu from her abode. They trust the secularism of the LTTE better.

Those who could look at how Kathirkaamam (Kataragama),

once the most favoured pilgrim place for Tamil Saivites, has been confiscated from their predominance and how all the ancient temples behind the Tamil Saiva myth, such as Thiruketheesvaram (Maanthai), Thirukkoan'esvaram (Trincomalee), Nakuleasvaram (Keerimalai) and Maaviddapuram are denied to devotees, being inside of 'High Security Zones', could understand the fear of Tamil Christians about Madu.

The question is whether the International Community and India, which contribute to the military option of Sri Lanka, don't understand or don't want to understand the fact that if there is anything to be defeated militarily in Sri Lanka, it is the chauvinism of the Sri Lankan State.

Our Lady of Madhu...

Continued from p8

the statue of the Virgin Mary they travel there to venerate has been taken away for the first time in more than four hundred years.

Bishop Joseph said there had been intense shelling in the area and the priests had spent the day in bunkers.

Rev. Fr. Administrator Emilianus Pillai, Rev. Fr. Assistant Administrator E. Sebamalai, Parish Priest of Vangkaalai Rev. Fr. Antony Gnanapragasam, Vavuniya Komarasankulam Parish Priest Rev. Fr. Antony Sagayam and four Reverend Sisters left the Shrine's premises according to Bishop's House.

Speaking to the BBC corre-

spondent in Colombo, the Military spokesman confirmed that the troops are positioned about two kilometres from Madhu church.

The military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara insisted the army was not shelling the shrine and the Tamil Tigers must be responsible for the firing.

"We don't know whether we can come back and even if we come back Madhu shrine may be turned to rubble. That is the way both sides are fighting. If the Sri Lanka army does not decide to take a different route from Pandivirichchan instead of going through Madhu there will be total destruction," the Bishop said.

According to estimated statis-

tics, about 30,000 internally displaced people were living in Mannar District last year, reported the Daily Mirror.

Of that number 10,000 to 15,000 were reportedly living in the No-War Zone reserved for the historic Madhu Church.

By March 2008 only 700 IDPs were believed to be living in Madhu area. It is believed that they, too, have now left the area, the paper said.

According to military sources, many IDPs had moved to Maanthai West, about 30 kilometers from Madhu, the Daily Mirror said. An estimated 14,000 IDPs are believed to have settled in Maanthai after the mass exodus.

Elections quicker...

Continued from p11

remember.

"We have fled our homes on so many occasions and come back that it was almost a part of routine life," Sundaralingam said.

In fact, the last harvest was one of the best in recent years due partly to high rice prices in the Sri Lankan market and rich fishing operators have begun to cast eyes on coastal fishing spots like Vakara, untapped for more than a decade.

The Rajapakse government has publicly pledged that development projects in the district would be fast-tracked after the local government elections.

Each of the nine newly constituted councils were handed Rs 2.5 million (23,000 dollars) by the President at the swearing-in ceremony in mid March as support for local projects.

But just two weeks after the elections, two police officers were killed and five others, including three civilians, injured in a claymore attack in an area south of Vavunathivu.

Civilians who fled their villages were resettled after a special registration process and issued special identity cards.

Outsiders still cannot travel about freely in the region.

The U.N. and other relief agencies working in the areas have controlled access.

Development projects are likely to be delayed, at least till after the conclusion of the May 10 elections for the eastern provincial council that the government is anxious to conduct.

Like, the local body elections, this could end in a walkover for the ruling coalition.

Batticaloa is one of three districts that fall in the eastern province.

Whoever wins, the local pop-

'We were given tsunami money but we spent it surviving'

ulation is only interested in a peaceful and settled existence, after what they have been through. Much hope is placed on children growing up in these troubled areas.

Mana Madanaraja, a 14-year-old in Vavunathivu, has just recovered from a bout of measles but says that he likes going to school now. "I like it, we can play in the ground without any fear. I go to school every day."

Madanaraja's ambition is to be an engineer, "I want to help the people," he said, looking around at the dirt track road and ruined houses. But his school lacks basics such as text books. "The teachers said that we will soon be getting them, it is difficult to study without text books."

NEWS

ACF families doubt justice...

Continued from p2

military said they were trapped in fighting between troops and the Tigers.

Shantha told the hearing that her nephew, also her adopted son, joined the NGO because he could not get a government job, going to work by bicycle and "leaving again in a coffin".

She also told of threats after Jayaseelan's death from a group

'She had not even been allowed to see the body before burial or file a police report'

of unidentified men dressed in civilian clothes.

"They warned us not to speak about this incident to anyone," she said, wiping away tears.

Shantha, an ethnic Tamil, said she had not even been allowed to see Jayaseelan's body before burial or file a police report.

Lawyer for the army, Gomin Dayasiri, pressed Shantha on foreign negligence and leapt on an admission by rights lawyer Desmond Fernando that he had secretly been told who carried out the massacre by Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe.

Mr. Fernando said he no longer wished to participate in the Presidential Commission of Inquiry because he was privy to such information, reported the Daily Mirror.

However, when the State

Counsel objected to this statement, some Commissioners requested Mr. Fernando to repeat his original statement as they had not heard it properly. "I only said I had a confidential discussion with the Minister," Mr. Fernando said by way of an explanation.

"He said the minister had told him who the killer was," the State Counsel claimed.

"No, I did not say that at all," Mr. Fernando responded. The inquiry was then disrupted by a heated argument on the impact of this revelation.

"Unfortunately the statement may not have been recorded as only four microphones can be used at the same time. We will have to check the official recording later," Chairman N.K. Udalgama said.

International monitors recently told the government they were withdrawing from the inquiry because of official interference and lack of internationally acceptable standards.

Separately, a rights group charged that a local Muslim home guard - a police auxiliary - and two constables are the killers of most of the group.

It said witnesses described an "air of celebration" at Muttur police station after the massacre and that senior figures in the nearby northeastern town of Trincomalee apparently also backed the killings.

The report said the execution-style murder of five Tamil students in Trincomalee earlier in 2006 had also been covered up and one of the responsible officers promoted, fostering a culture

of impunity as a 2002 ceasefire collapsed into open war.

On 02 January, 2006, five high school students who had gone to spend the evening near Dutch Bay sea beach were shot dead in execution style allegedly by the Sri Lankan Special Task Force personnel at the roundabout junction in front of the beach. The killers exploded hand grenades in the vicinity and planted a grenade in the pocket of one of the victims.

The police told media that the

One of the lawyers claimed Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe told him who the killers were.

'deaths' were caused when a hand grenade in the possession of the youths exploded.

"It shows the government investigations into the massacre were little more than a bad joke played out on the victims' families and the international community," said Human Rights Watch senior legal adviser James Ross.

The U.S. State Department, in its recent annual rights report, said the Sri Lankan state's respect for human rights continued to decline in 2007, citing reports of killings by government agents and collaboration between the state and paramilitaries accused of major abuses.

UN confirms...

Continued from p12

been brought to trial in connection to incidents of rape in custody although one successful prosecution has been brought in a case where the victim of rape was also murdered."

Also in 2001, Amnesty wrote to then Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, "urging her to take action to stop rape by security forces and bring perpetrators to justice" in response to reports of rape by security forces "in Mannar, Batticaloa, Negombo and Jaffna."

"To date, no response has been received to the appeal," Amnesty later said in a special report titled "Sri Lanka: Rape in Custody" which was published in January 2002, just as the Norwegian brokered Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) came into being.

Earlier, in March 2000, the then United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, expressed her "grave concern" over the lack of serious investigation into allegations of gang rape and murder of women and girls by the Sri Lankan security forces.

In 2000, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) protested that "Sri Lankan security forces are using systematic rape and murder of Tamil women to subjugate the Tamil population... Impunity continues to reign as rape is used as a weapon of war in Sri Lanka."

In its 1999 annual report, Amnesty International, said rape of female detainees was used

amongst a range of torture methods.

In a statement to the UN in 1998, the World Organisation against Torture observed: "Sri Lankan soldiers have raped both women and young girls on a massive scale, and often with impunity, since reporting often leads to reprisals against the victims and their families."

"The consistent policy of rape and violence against Tamil women that we have documented for many years is a fundamental military tactic of the Sri Lankan

Colombo's actions will determine whether the UN will deploy Sri Lankan soldiers in future peace-keeping operations

forces," International Educational Development, an NGO, also told the UN that year.

Human rights NGOs have frequently protested the impunity Sri Lankan soldiers enjoy regarding rapes and other abuses.

"Only one of the thousands of rapes which have been reported, has resulted in a conviction," Pax Romana said.

"There also seems to be little point to expect justice on the basis of the constitution since the constitution itself provides the mechanisms and justifications for the commission of these war crimes and encourages impunity."

Fear of being 'disappeared'...

Continued from p13

attacks against civilians.

In an interview, Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona said the LTTE have exaggerated reports of abductions for propaganda purposes.

He also said that after U.S. diplomats provided a list of 355 missing people, the government launched an investigation and found that most of the missing had left the country of their own volition.

"We reviewed the lists meticulously; 23 people were found alive and kicking. But there were repetitions on the list," Kohona said.

Other names "were suspiciously similar to those recorded by immigration officials as people who had left the country."

He emphasized that the Tigers are recognized as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government and others across the world.

He also said the Tigers were using violence and intimidation abroad to fund the group, shaking down Tamil shopkeepers from

London to Virginia for contributions.

"We are fighting a brutal terrorist group," Kohona said.

"Our friends abroad must look at the pressures they are putting on us very carefully. They may be throwing a lifeline to a brutal terrorist group."

On Web sites and in statements, the LTTE say they are part of a populist movement that wants a separate homeland on this island off the coast of southern India.

They claim to be defending the rights of Tamils, who they contend are discriminated against by the Buddhist Sinhalese majority.

The Sri Lankan government does not permit journalists near the front lines.

Mano Ganesan, a Tamil member of Parliament who heads a civil monitoring commission on disappearances, said that the unexplained arrests only further marginalize the Tamil community and breed anger among frustrated youth.

"The government arrests Tamils for being Tamil," Ganesan

said. "And they ask questions later."

"I hate terrorism. I don't want bombs to go off. But that doesn't mean the government should conduct mass arrests without even giving proof or updates to the families."

In a neighborhood where alleyways hold tea shops and temples with shrines to Hindu gods, many Tamils worry and wait for their missing relatives to appear.

Mithralatha, the grandmother whose son is missing, said she was surprised how the war has affected her family. Her son married a Sinhalese in what is known here as "a mixed-fruit marriage."

"My son was Tamil, but he was never involved in anything with the rebel movements," she said. "I can't believe that this has happened."

Her oldest granddaughter, Vartha Rasta, spends her afternoons caring for siblings.

She doesn't see the issue as complicated. "We just want our father back," she said as her grandmother cried.

Sri Lanka's SOS...

Continued from p4

In Mannar, the military has been trying for months to advance into LTTE territory. And with rains starting around two weeks ago, the military push could slow down further.

The Sri Lankan military controls most of Mannar, Vavuniya and Jaffna. The Tigers are in control of the whole of Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi districts.

Despite some gains, the military is finding the going tough in the north, in contrast to the eastern wing of the country that came under Colombo's control in 2007 after the Tigers withdrew their forces.

The resistance the LTTE is putting up is making Sri Lanka turn to Pakistan to make up ammunition it is exhausting, the Indian sources said.

Sri Lanka started buying arms and ammunition from Pakistan in a big way from 1999. The total purchases until December 2007 were worth \$50 million while there has been a sudden jump in the quantity of merchandise ordered this year.

Pakistan's main military supplies to Sri Lanka include mortar ammunition, radio sets, hand grenades, naval ammunition and tanks.

The military links between Islamabad and Colombo worry New Delhi because this gives Pakistan access to Sri Lankan defence establishments and intelligence that analysts here fear hurts Indian security interests in the long run.

India mainly provides what it says are non-lethal military supplies to Sri Lanka. And while refusing it offensive weapons, New Delhi has publicly expressed displeasure over Sri Lanka's military purchases from Pakistan and China.

Sri Lankan officials argue that they are free to go to any country for weapons supplies since India refuses to provide lethal weapons. Colombo says that in any case it keeps New Delhi informed about their shopping list.

A section of the Indian establishment feels that with so much military hardware pouring into Sri Lanka, the war in the island is unlikely to end any time soon.

British Tamil athletics meet in UK



An athletics meet organized by the Tamil diasporas in Britain is to take place on April 13. Organisers say the event will be a competition between houses, with best performing athletes accumulating points for the respective houses. This is a format followed commonly back home in meets between clubs or schools. Each 'house' will consist of Tamils living in different areas in the UK. Although this is a first for the British Tamil community, organizers say they have worked hard to make it of a high standard both in terms of organization and competition. The venue will be a newly revamped center for athletics that has been designated an Olympics training centre by the UK ministry for sports and leisure. The athletics meet will be an example of the Tamil peoples' unity and sporting excellence, said a volunteer involved in trials being held locally over the coming two weeks. Many former sportsmen and sportswomen as well as enthusiasts have been instrumental in getting the project off the ground. Advice has also been forthcoming from organizations involved in British athletics. The opening ceremony will showcase Tamil peoples' heritage and culture and will be eye-catching. Around 250 men and women will perform a march past. Competition will be age and gender based. Relays, tug-of-wars and children's events will also feature. Sports competitions aim to engender a culture that looks beyond just victory and accept both success and failure with equal heart. They help build a fine society that is both disciplined and united. Therefore, meets such as these are vital for Diaspora community, be it for young or old. At a time when the Tamil peoples' culture and identity are being intentionally destroyed in their homeland, events such as these will help them prosper and revitalize. More details on the athletics meet can be found on www.bt-sc.com and Tamil media.

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