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Concern grows for returning refugees

CONCERN has been steadily mounting over the welfare of some 2,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees returned to Jaffna from South India in the last few weeks despite the continuing lack of improvement in the situation in the north of the island.

The refugees have been arriving at Kankasanturai since early April as part of the Indian-sponsored repatriation programme carried out in cooperation with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The programme has returned over 8,000 Tamils to the Mannar area since January.

Although UNHCR assistance supplies the refugees with an initial relief package of dry rations and cash subsidies, there is little sign that any of the initiatives originally envisaged by the programme to reconstruct essential services such as housing, agriculture, public health and education are underway.

Half of Jaffna is still in a state of shock - the other half in a state of siege. Repairs urgently required for housing stocks, roads pitted with land-mine craters and the shattered public water supply remain hampered by the lack of civil administration. Government offices open only in the last week of every month.

In the absence of police, robbery and petty pilfering have become a daily event. Food stocks remain low. Relief supplies from Colombo, the staple means of survival for most of the population, are inadequate

and continually delayed.

Operations by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) continue to have a high profile. The Vadamaratchy area was subject to a two-week search-and-sweep operation in early May, drawing allegations of widespread intimidation and harassment by IPKF troops from the local Citizens Committee. Students due to sit the Fifth Standard scholarship examination in Vadamaratchy on 14 May were denied the opportunity as schools remained closed.

Some of the returnees to the Mannar area on the UNHCR programme have encountered other difficulties. On-the-spot rehabilitation is largely carried out by voluntary and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who are often understaffed and underfunded. Rebuilding a house means NGOs must supply half of the funds allotted by the Ministry of Rehabilitation. Housing assistance is only offered to those who already possess the land. Cement and tin sheeting are scarce and sell at inflated prices.

Others have found less assistance than they expected. Part of a group of 549 returnees to Mannar taken by UNHCR in late February to the Thirukeethswaram temple were subsequently refused accommodation by temple authorities. The refugees were left outside the temple to fend for themselves. On the return journey one of the UNHCR vehicles was reportedly hijacked by members of a militant group.

A number of observers also remain unconvinced of the voluntary nature of the return of some refugees to the island. Recent Indian press reports have drawn attention to allegations of refugees evicted at gun-point from the run-down cyclone shelters that double as refugee camps in the South Arcot district of Tamil Nadu.

Services in the larger camps such as Mandapam are being gradually run down as many Indian-based NGOs withdraw, offering the refugees little choice. The inmates of several camps in Tamil Nadu have directly petitioned Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to delay their return until an effective peace agreement has been reached. The London-based Tamil Refugee Action Group (TRAG) has appealed to UNHCR to look again at the programme, emphasising the continuing hostilities throughout the north and the uncertain logistics of the operation.

European agencies have expressed concern that UNHCR is not present at the point of departure making it impossible to effectively monitor the voluntary nature of the movement.

Over the last few months the World Alliance of YMCAs based in Geneva has drawn attention to what it considers to be the hasty and ill-timed nature of the programme and its underlying lack of consensus. Other agencies may also feel obliged to speak out if the prevailing conditions throughout northern Sri Lanka do not improve dramatically.

Bogus agreement blots out peace hopes

A SURPRISE AGREEMENT signed on 10 May between the Sri Lankan Government and the proscribed Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) guaranteeing the southern extremist group amnesty and a return to the democratic process, was just a few days later first disputed and then discredited on all sides.

The moving force behind the initiative, an alleged JVP spokesman K C Senanayake, undertook to deliver the written consent of JVP leaders Rohana Wijeweera and Upatissa Gamanayake to the wide-ranging agreement that would rehabilitate the JVP if they agreed to effect a large-scale surrender of arms by 29 May.

The peace agreement announced by National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali was subsequently denied and discredited as both Wijeweera and Gamanayake sent communiques to the Sri Lankan press disassociating themselves from the endeavours of the so-called JVP intermediary Senanayake.

The revelation that Senanayake was currently under investigation for two other - and perhaps slightly more mundane - fraud cases did not serve to bolster his credibility.

A few days later in a six page affidavit given to the Sri Lankan Freedom Party journal *Dinasesa*, Senanayake denied witnessing the JVP leaders signing the document, and said he wished nothing further to do with the agreement.

After its initial confusion the government quickly regained its political sure-footedness. There was no agreement with the JVP, Lands and Mahaweli Minister Gamini Dissanayake

told a news conference on 14 May but the proscription on the JVP was lifted unconditionally until 29 May and all security operations in the south were suspended.

As the killing of Provincial Council (PC) candidates continued unabated, cordon-and-search operations were hastily reintroduced - on a dramatic scale in the Akuessa area where on 15 May the residence of United National Party (UNP) PC candidate P Abeywickreme was attacked and six people killed.

Other PC candidates in Hapugalle and Kataragama died in similar attacks and a few days later on 21 May Nandalal Fernando secretary general of the UNP was gunned down in a Colombo street only yards away from where party chairman Harsha Abeywardene was killed in December.

Arrests continued throughout the south as talk of agreements died away and concern for the next round of PC elections - already postponed until 9 June - began to surface.

The foundering of the JVP peace ploy has if anything brought the government certain perhaps unsought advantages on the international stage. They have been seen to extend the hand of peace and reason to attempt to bring so-called subversive elements back into the mainstream of political life. They may now legitimately and however reluctantly redouble their efforts to break the spell of the subversives in the south.

But one has to wonder if they ever really expected Rohana Wijeweera to walk out of the jungle smiling and willing to debate definitions of the democratic process.

Fast suspended

Mrs Susheela Ganeshan (50) the Mothers Front member who had completed 35 days of a protest fast at the Trincomalee Sivan temple called off her fast on 14 May after an appeal from Indian Army commander Brigadier J Joshi on the grounds that a ceasefire between the IPKF and the LTTE was imminent.

Return of TULF

Leaders of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) were scheduled to return to Sri Lanka from political exile in Madras on 16 May after reaching an agreement with the LTTE which allows TULF members to participate in mainstream politics. TULF sources said that the party had not yet decided whether to participate in the Provincial Council elections for the north and east.

STF strengthened

The strength of the police paramilitary unit the Special Task Force (STF) is to be doubled over the next two years to around 5,000, security sources announced earlier this month. The STF, created in 1983 to handle continuing civil unrest, has a strong presence in Batticaloa District and around six bases in the Matara and Hambantota Districts.

Emergency continues

The extension of the state of Emergency and all regulations pertaining to it was passed by Parliament on 19 May by 95 votes to eight. All Opposition MPs voted against the motion. A state of Emergency has now been in force for five years in Sri Lanka and has been extended 60 times.

COMMENT

THE MILITANTS

Fact and factions

The intrusion of violence into the daily life of people and politics has grown sadly familiar throughout Sri Lanka in the last ten years. Now in the north and east the struggle for Tamil autonomy has turned in on itself with factions of different militant groups fighting it out among themselves as well as with their erstwhile enemies.

With the breakdown of the Peace Accord last October the battle lines were inevitably redrawn. As the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were forced underground in the wake of the Indian Peace Keeping Force there appeared groups of armed men in unmarked uniforms said also to be responsible for some of the intimidation, theft and assault visited on the civilian population.

The imposing of *hartal* - general strikes - and the levying of *kappams* or "taxes" on the civilian population were to become important trials of strength for militant groups - for he who controlled the people would hold the ground they occupied.

Towns like Vavuniya and Mannar, said to be relatively quiet before the deployment of the IPKF, set the stage for a full-scale struggle between factions of the Peoples Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO).

Groups such as PLOTE and TELO and the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Force (EPRLF) have performed a delicate balancing act since the Accord - endorsing

elements of it and publicly pursuing peace while privately pursuing each other. The policy of facing both ways has paid dividends but it has not been without its dangers.

Each group has sought to destabilise and discredit each other often by dubious and violent means in the race for patronage, power and, what now appears to be the ultimate goal recognition as a political party.

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Some like the EPRLF and the now-notorious splinter group Three Stars appear to have gone too far and have been publicly reviled by the Tamil community as collaborators - Three Stars particularly as the men behind the masks identifying suspects at IPKF checkpoints and as the perpetrators of robbery and intimidation.

Others like PLOTE and its leader Uma Maheswaran - formerly Chairman of the LTTE - are accused of maintaining a secret link or "nexus" as the press describe it with the Tigers.

The Tigers in turn have sought to claw back their superiority by compromising the others as well as gunning for them. Much of the talk of a PLOTE-LTTE "nexus" emanated from the congratulatory messages the LTTE were prone to sending PLOTE after attacks such as that on Vavuniya railway station - knowing that the broadcast would be monitored

by the IPKF.

But the visible struggle in Vavuniya and the Wannu region always seemed to be between these two front-runners for respectability, PLOTE and TELO. Since the beginning of the year clashes between the two groups gradually intensified as did the confusion and disquiet of the civilian population faced with intimidation and forcible *hartal*.

PLOTE, for so long the leading contender, suffered a serious set-back when IPKF troops sealed off PLOTE headquarters at Eeratperi-yakulam on 10 May taking 35 militants and over a hundred civilians into custody in an operation supposedly spear-headed by TELO cadres. TELO in turn were to meet the same fate when the IPKF moved in on them ten days later. Now it appears that there may be other factors for their collective fall from grace.

Persistent rumours coming out of the Wannu region say that the Indian government has almost reached a settlement with the LTTE in talks in the jungles north of Vavuniya - where Kittu, the Madras-based LTTE leader is said to be guaranteeing the IPKFs good behaviour after the *Rahim* and *Johnny* debacle.

Indian Defence Minister K C Pant's visit to Colombo has been put off till the end of May in the hope that an agreement with the Tigers will be ready for him to announce on his arrival.

The next few weeks may tell us whether the militants are playing at peace or are weary of war.

EUROPE

Governments seek a way out for Tamil refugees

DISCUSSIONS held in Norway on 20 May by representatives of 12 governments with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) may have serious implications for Tamil refugees and asylum-seekers throughout Europe.

Among measures considered in this latest of a series of regular consultations between governments and UNHCR were the return of Tamils refused asylum to Sri Lanka and cooperation between European countries to assist the voluntary return of Tamil refugees in Europe to the island.

Over the past few years UNHCR has asked governments not to send even rejected asylum applicants back to Sri Lanka until it is considered safe for them to return - and governments have largely respected this position.

At the meeting UNHCR indicated that governments should now decide for themselves, in view of what are considered to be appreciable improvements in the security situation on the island. UNHCR are apparently not now opposing the return of rejected asylum-seekers to the Mannar area - where they operate a Special Programme of Limited Assistance to returnees - but cannot take any responsibility for their safety.

Observers say these latest discussions herald a hardening of attitudes towards the Tamil refugee community in Europe. UNHCR are asking governments to co-operate closely with the Sri Lankan authorities

- by submitting names and obtaining prior clearance. But for some asylum-seekers it may be a return to the very circumstances which they wished to escape.

In many European countries there has been an acknowledged - and in some cases official - *tolerance* shown to rejected asylum-seekers who fear to return to Sri Lanka.

Switzerland, with some 4,500 Tamil asylum-seekers, has 1,500 who have been refused and another 1,300 whose cases are still pending. Present Swiss policy gives rejected applicants nine months to leave the country and even then will not seek to forcibly remove them unless they break the law.

Now they are exploring with other European nations a combination of financial incentives and withdrawal of support - such as work permits - to encourage Tamils to leave of their own accord. Denmark has already said that it will close down its family reunification programme for Tamil refugees and new church-based sanctuary movements have emerged in Berlin in the face of anticipated deportations.

European refugee workers commented that UNHCR had acted provocatively in putting forward a view on the return of people not expressly within its mandate and that this represented a disturbing change both in its policy and its attitude. Tamil refugees throughout Europe will be watching events closely over the next few months to see if such fears are justified.

The SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas.

If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact:

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Six British MPs led by Pat Wall put down a motion in the House of Commons on 22 April drawing attention to the continuing hostilities in Sri Lanka and reported violations of human rights. They called on the government to reverse its decision to forcibly deport Tamil asylum-seekers presently living in the UK and demanded an end to British military aid to Sri Lanka.

Lawyers representing eleven Tamils refused asylum in Holland said that they would go to court on 26 May to ask that their clients be allowed to remain in the country until their appeal against the decision was heard. They claimed that this was the first time Dutch authorities had tried to deport rejected asylum-seekers to Sri Lanka.

More than half a million pounds has been pledged by the Norwegian government to a rehabilitation programme for repatriated Tamil refugees in Sri Lanka run by the Norwegian Refugee Council. The programme will provide interest-free loans to returning fishermen to re-equip them with boats, nets and working capital. Repaid loans will be made available to subsequent returnees.