

# The Sri Lanka Monitor

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## Fighting flares in Mannar District

FIFTEEN DAYS of fierce fighting in isolated north western Mannar District claimed hundreds of lives after guerrillas of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stormed Sri Lankan Army camps at Silavathurai and Kokkupadayan in mid March.

The attacks followed a new Army offensive north and west of Vavuniya designed to secure the roads to Mannar and Mullaitivu and link an island-wide front against the North. The Army advance north accompanied by aerial bombing of Sasthrikulam and Semamadu was halted by a landmine blast at Illukulam which killed four soldiers. Another 11 died on 22 March when the Tigers destroyed an Army camp at Thandikulam.

Hours after new Defence Minister D.B.Wijetunge visited Mannar and Vavuniya, the Tigers laid siege to two remote Army camps south of Mannar Island using mortars and rocket propelled grenades. Wave after wave of teenage cadres from the LTTE "baby brigades" attacked Silavathurai as Sri Lankan helicopter gunships threw a ring of fire around the base. A truck filled with explosives driven by a Tiger suicide squad exploded 100 metres from the camp gates. A military outpost at Kokkupadayan a few miles north was overrun but troop reinforcements airlifted from Anuradhapura and four days of search and destroy missions by the Sri Lankan air force broke the siege of Silavathurai.

Defence sources in Colombo said the bodies of 115 Tiger teenage fighters were recovered, many of them "smaller than their weapons they carried". Many others lie entombed in thick jungles after Sri Lankan air strikes. Unconfirmed reports say over 250 badly wounded guerrillas were ferried north for treatment at the

### Rumours of peace precede Indian elections

ICRC-run hospital in Jaffna. The Army says 23 soldiers were killed and another 56 wounded. Fighting continued until late March a few miles north of Silavathurai at Veppankulam, where the Army claims another 100 Tiger cadres and 25 soldiers were killed.

Analysts say the Tigers' objectives at Silavathurai were twofold. To secure the coastline south of Mannar would give the LTTE access to the safest supply route to south India - Adam's Bridge, a shoal of shifting sandbanks across the Palk Strait that effectively joins Mannar Island and Tamil Nadu. The other aim was to up the stakes in the psychological battle with the Army. LTTE deputy leader *Mahattaya* told the Indian press last month that the Tigers have evolved from a guerrilla force into a full-scale national liberation army capable of large set-piece battles like the capture of Mankulam last November. The Tigers believe the Army's commitment to a military solution will crumble if their self-belief is shaken. But stemming the suicidal onslaught at Silavathurai will only have strengthened the Army's resolve.

In late March, 10,000 soldiers launched a coast-to-coast offensive on the North from Mannar to Mullaitivu. After weeks of stalemate outside Vavuniya, the Army circumvented a stretch of Tiger landmines and pushed eight miles up the Mannar road. Hundreds of civilians fled as Puvarasankulam was bombed from the air. On the west coast, security forces pushed through the Tiger lines at Nanattan but encountered stiff resistance at Murunkan.

Refugees from the surrounding countryside are streaming into the Catholic shrine at Madhu, mid-way between Mannar and Vavuniya where international refugee agency UNHCR feeds 20,000 people every day. Supply lines are broken and their situation increasingly precarious.

In Jaffna, security forces hemmed into a six-mile "green line" around the strategic part of Kankesanthurai and Palaly airbase pushed forward one mile east destroying bunkers and killing 11 guerrillas. In late March the LTTE launched a massive assault on Karainagar, Sri Lanka's largest Navy base on Karaitivu Island east of Jaffna. Defence sources maintain over 50 Tigers and six soldiers were killed in hand-to-hand fighting but observers say casualty figures given by both sides are increasingly unreliable.

Amid the carnage, there is a curious wave of optimism in both Jaffna and Colombo that a ceasefire if not a settlement is very close. Jaffna believes President Premadasa has given the Army a June deadline to tame the Tigers before he sues for peace. Some say the death of Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne last month removes a major hurdle to new negotiations. Colombo expects a ceasefire on Tamil/Sinhalese New Year in mid April and views the current escalation of fighting as preparations by both sides to bargain from a position of strength.

After Indian President Venkataraman dissolved New Delhi's parliament on 13 March, scheduling fresh elections in late May, Mr Premadasa and the Tigers fear the return of Rajiv Gandhi who has old scores to settle with both of them. A spate of negotiations, real or otherwise, would override Indian intervention as it did in March last year when an Indian Peace Keeping Force was forced to withdraw from northern Sri Lanka.

Discussions between Sri Lanka's Bradman Weerakoon and LTTE Paris representative Lawrence Thilakar, attending the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in early March suggest the Government may drop its key demand for immediate disarmament in return for a Tiger statement of intent to enter the democratic process. The gradients of peace, whenever it comes, may be as tortuous as the gyrations of war.

As the crackdown continues on Sri Lankan militants in south India, 100,000 refugees fear the knock that comes in the night. A report on *Page Two*. Why have official refugee figures in Sri Lanka tumbled by 300,000 in three months while the fighting intensifies? The background on *Page Three*. The Government says Amnesty International are welcome to make a research visit to Sri Lanka. More details on *Page Four*.

## THE NORTH

## Bitter harvest

RELIEF WORKERS in the war-torn North say conditions have marginally improved this month with more food aid arriving by sea and a good rice harvest in the Kilinochchi area.

Relief ships can use a new ICRC point at Valaipadu on the coast south of Pooneryn but logistics remain fragile. Road links are bad and it takes ten days to unload ships by barge and fishing boat. Lines of trucks wait outside Pooneryn to make the hazardous night ferry crossing to Jaffna. Private traders in Colombo running rice into the peninsula charge between Rs 400,000 and Rs 300,000 (\$7,500) a lorry load for what can be a four-week round trip.

Since the LTTE strengthened the bridge at Nochchimodai, road links to Jaffna have improved but many lorries returning south with Jaffna onions were trapped at Omanthai in mid-March by Army operations in north Vavuniya, and their loads spoiled.

The price of rice in Jaffna has dropped from Rs 50 to Rs 30 a kilo after a good harvest in Kilinochchi, the rice bowl of the North. Other sources say the harvest is down by 60% and many farmers will hold back grain usually sold in Jaffna. The LTTE has introduced fixed prices for all essential foodstuffs but coconut oil remains costly at Rs 32 a bottle.

The real crisis now is the acute shortage of drugs and other medical supplies and the lack of money in circulation. Over 40 items including most medicines, candles, batteries, cement, cycle parts and petrol are banned by the Army from relief convoys to the North. Since the Tigers converted most vehicles in Jaffna

to run on kerosene, strict new regulations on fuel sales in Vavuniya have been introduced to beat the "bicycle brigades" of black marketeers who brave the round trip from Jaffna once a week.

Over 30 people died in aerial bombing raids on Chunnakam, Jaffna town, Kokkuvil and Chavakachcheri that followed the assassination of Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne in Colombo on 2 March. None of them were combatants. Kilinochchi was heavily bombed last month as well as Vaddakachchi Government farm, five miles from the town, and a number of civilians killed.

There is a growing confidence among Tiger leaders in Jaffna and their iron grip governs every aspect of daily life. Discipline within "the movement" remains tight. Other Tamil sources say Vadamaratchchi deputy leader *Sengathir* disappeared this month and *Akilan* in charge of LTTE finances in the Jaffna Islands was executed for misappropriating funds.

The LTTE are said to hold over 3,000 Tamil prisoners in the Jaffna peninsula accused of collaboration or dissent and used to build hundreds of bunkers and bombshelters. Many were detained in the wake of the Indian withdrawal last March. A fresh wave of arrests took place in places like Karaveddy last August as civilian discontent grew over food shortages and LTTE extortion.

During the New Year ceasefire, the Tigers allowed the ICRC to visit 40 Sri Lankan policemen of the 600 captured when war broke out in June. The others are feared dead. But the LTTE refuses point blank to acknowledge the existence of civilian prisoners in the North.

## Terms of trade

AFTER Sri Lanka requested \$450 million last month to meet its balance of payments crisis, officials from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) arrived in Colombo in early March to take a long hard look at the economy.

Analysts say high on the list of IMF demands will be a further devaluation of the rupee and some visible progress in privatising Sri Lanka's inefficient state-owned industries. President Premadasa has promised all state corporations will be privatised by the end of this year but few believe this is a realistic proposition. Other state services under threat are free tertiary education and free medical care.

Earlier this year the World Bank froze all payments to Sri Lanka until Mr Premadasa's controversial Poverty Alleviation Programme, *Janasaviya*, was reformed along more overtly capitalist lines. Sri Lankan officials claim a "misunderstanding" and the programme is being revamped with more production-oriented guidelines.

Following the IMF visit, Government sources were keen to emphasize an unexpected upturn in balance of payments figures for 1990 when exports grew by 26% and imports by only 18%. The economic fallout from the Gulf crisis is less than feared, around \$50 million in lost revenues and remittances. Inflation also fell to 15% in January but for the unofficial figure add another 10%.

*Lankans under siege in south India*

THERE IS growing pressure on 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu who live outside the government-controlled camps as a crackdown against LTTE militants in the south Indian state continues.

Many live in cheap lodgings on remittances from relatives abroad and after a series of midnight police raids, landlords are asking the refugees to leave. Another 123,000 Sri Lankans live in 243 official camps throughout the state.

Home Affairs Minister S.K.Sahay told the press that 40 hard-core LTTE and another 80 suspected militants were

apprehended in the last two months along with six high powered radio transmitters and substantial quantities of gold and foreign currency.

Over 20,000 litres of diesel have been seized as Indian coastguards clamp down on the Tigers' vital supply lines across the Palk Strait. But over 8,000 fishing craft leave small ports in south India every day and reports say the Tigers have changed their tactics using less powerful boats that blend in with the fishing fleets.

Other reports say over 1,000 suspected Sri Lankan militants are currently in detention in Tamil Nadu. Many of them

belong to anti-LTTE groups such as TELO who fled when the Indian Peace Keeping Force withdrew from Sri Lanka last March. Like TELO many of them are now back in Sri Lanka fighting for the Government against the Tigers.

TELO military leader *Selvam* and another 300 TELO cadres detained in Pudukottai ended a ten-day hunger strike in late March after meeting Indian officials. But many refugees are detained without charge and a Madras High Court ruling on 13 March has declared the process illegal. A shoal of habeas corpus petitions is expected to follow.

*Relief improves but rehabilitation will be a long haul*

## Bombing Amparai, blasting Batticaloa

TWO MASSIVE bomb explosions ripped through Akkaraipatru's crowded fish market in remote Amparai District on 24 March, killing eight people and injuring 40. Most of the victims were Muslims and security sources blamed the Tamil Tigers for the attack. An Army curfew was clamped down as tension rose and Muslim merchants closed their shops in protest at the killings.

A LTTE attack on Amparai Army camp in early March set off a series of roundups of Tamil civilians in Akkaraipatru and other areas by the feared police commando unit, the Special Task Force (STF).

Muslim farmers harvesting rice in fields bordering the Karaitivu-Amparai town road are now heavily guarded by Army units after Tiger brigades burned

large stocks of freshly harvested grain in Nintavur. Local sources say the Army is encouraging Muslims to harvest deserted Tamil fields and tension is increasing between the two communities.

Relief distribution has vastly improved in Amparai with refugees receiving seven days dry rations every ten days. Further north in Batticaloa District they receive the same amount every 20 days. But there are also signs of improvement in Batticaloa with schools opening and thousands of people who fled west of the lagoon slowly filtering back to their home areas. The Government plans to set up small-scale "transition camps" for the refugees close to their own villages so they can rebuild their wrecked houses and return to the camps at night. But there are no cash rehabilitation grants for the home-

less since the USAID-backed Government programme was frozen at the start of the June war and rebuilding will be a slow and painful process.

Army roundups continue in Batticaloa and Amparai with refugee concentrations particularly vulnerable. After appeals by Citizens Committees and the Catholic Church, the Army now provides a written list of those detained in large-scale operations like those in Batticaloa and Pandiruppu in early March, when 92 people were arrested and all but ten released. But there is still concern over individual disappearances in isolated areas where the Army operates with impunity.

The press reported a major night assault on key police installations in Batticaloa town by over 100 Tiger cadres on 24 March. Power lines were severed and fighting continued till dawn. Local sources say however a nervous police unit opened fire on an unseen target, sparking off crescendos of gunfire across Batticaloa town as on so many other nights.

South of the town towards the Muslim stronghold of Kalmunai there is fear and uncertainty after soldiers and Muslim Home Guards shot dead nine Tamil fishermen in front of their boats in an isolated area near Kaluvanchikudi. The ICRC running relief supplies into the area rescued one injured survivor.

## *Writing off refugees*

Sources in Colombo say the Treasury has given the Ministry of Rehabilitation an ultimatum that food aid to displaced persons outside refugee camps must cease. The logic is clear. Government spokesman Bradman Weerakoon told the press in late March that there are currently 230,000 people in refugee camps and another 440,000 displaced with friends and relatives. At a stroke the Government can write off 60% of its food aid requirement and pay off six months of credit from Colombo merchants and cooperative societies.

NGOs say the result will be to drive people back into designated refugee camps and the already overloaded relief system will seize up. They are also puzzled by the staggering drop in refugee figures - around 300,000 in three months - and discount their credibility. Officials say

there are now more accurate figures available from District Government Agents but a close look at refugee tables for this month shows many District figures for displaced persons are "not available". In Districts like Trincomalee, village headmen no longer receive a bonus to monitor refugee movements and the figures they return are increasingly suspect. HUDEC, Jaffna's Catholic relief agency, said over 500,000 people were refugees in the peninsula in February - a figure double the official estimate. India pledged an additional \$685,000 this month to set up refugee camps in northern Sri Lanka. Almost \$13 million was pledged last September to develop refugee camps in Mannar and Madhu under the auspices of international refugee agency UNHCR. Observers say this is to pave the way for the repatriation of over 200,000 Sri Lankan refugees in south India.

## Trincomalee boils over

LTTE attacks in outlying areas of Trincomalee District intensified this month when 11 Sri Lankan soldiers died in a landmine ambush outside Thoppur on 10 March. Another four soldiers were killed on foot patrol near Thiriyai north of Trincomalee town. Other clashes at Verugalaru, Palampatru, Alamkerni and Nilaveli killed another ten soldiers.

Trincomalee town remains tense. The town's male population was assembled on the beach on 18 March and paraded in front of masked informers. Sinhalese refugees have been moved from Fort Frederick to the bus stand area but ethnic tension still prevails. Night raids by Army death squads on 5,000 Tamils crammed into airless aircraft hangers at Clappenberg refugee camp continue and disappearances are on the increase.

Of over 80 men detained after Army sweeps last year on Tamil refugee camps

around Nilaveli, only 45 have been accounted for.

At Thambalakamam refugee camp near the main road to the south, distribution of dry rations has been suspended since last month as a punishment for allegedly supplying Tiger units close by. Refugees who have visited their homes in surrounding areas found them ransacked and crops destroyed.

Early on 3 April, 25 Sinhalese fishermen disappeared in Trincomalee Bay after five uniformed men in a speedboat sprayed them with machine-gun fire. Police blamed the Tigers while other reports say a Sri Lankan navy patrol mistook the fishermen for a LTTE unit. The next day, police narrowly averted a riot as 2,000 armed Sinhalese mobbed the Tamil section of the town seeking revenge. Troubled Trincomalee is again at boiling point.

13,000 JVP PRISONERS ARE DETAINED WITHOUT TRIAL AS SRI LANKA CONTINUES THE WORLD'S LARGEST SECURITY ROUND-UP

## Amnesty offered access to Sri Lanka

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL is welcome to visit Sri Lanka to investigate human rights abuses, said Government spokesman Bradman Weerakoon at a press conference in Colombo on 20 March. The invitation followed informal talks between an Amnesty delegation attending an international Trade Union conference in Colombo and senior Government officials, a few days earlier. Amnesty was last permitted access to Sri Lanka in 1982.

Observers say the offer marks an increasingly conciliatory position after donor governments again criticised Sri Lanka's human rights record at the crucial World Bank meeting in Paris in October last year. Others say the shift is tactical.

Mr Weerakoon, one of the doves in President Premadasa's cabinet, has set up a Human Rights Task Force to investigate excesses by the security forces, who are credited with 60,000 deaths in the wake of the failed insurrection in the

south by the rural Sinhalese marxist JVP movement.

In January, a Presidential Commission was established to investigate disappearances but critics say it has no retroactive powers and is merely a palliative to allay international concern. Of 300 complaints submitted to the Commission in the last two months only ten fall inside its limited terms of reference. Last October, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) called on the Government to establish an independent commission of enquiry to investigate disappearances since 1983.

Human rights groups such as OPFMD working for the families of the disappeared say they have thousands of affidavits from those who have lost husbands and sons in the last three years. President Premadasa speaking in late March admitted over 13,000 JVP suspects were in government custody - currently the largest detention operation in the world - but said many were being detained for their own safety to prevent reprisals by families

attacked by the JVP. Mr Premadasa's ruling United National Party (UNP) say almost 8,000 people were assassinated by the JVP in three years of violent revolt, 1,700 of them UNP supporters. The DJV, the military wing of the JVP, though much reduced remains an active force and reports this month speak of guerrillas pushed out of Moneragala by Army operations, seeking shelter in Trincomalee District.

Arrests of suspected "subversives" continue at around 100 a week. Opposition MP S.A.R. Maddumabandara told Parliament on 21 March that large numbers of local youth were being held in Badulla for no clear reason. Badulla police in the last two years have established a savage reputation for corruption, extortion and violence. Another 27 youths, all of them Tamils, were rounded up in Kandy in mid March. Over 125 University students, the spearhead of the JVP revolt, have been in custody for the last two years without being charged.

## NGOs fear witch-hunt in new government enquiry

A GOVERNMENT official told Sri Lanka's new Commission of Enquiry into Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) at its first public sitting on 25 March, that a foreign development agency had funded a Tiger front organisation.

Mrs Malsiri Dias from the Planning Ministry read out newspaper reports from 1985, which accused Dutch agency NOVIB of supporting the *Gandhiyam* development organisation in Vavuniya, knowing it was running LTTE training camps.

NGOs are worried by the witch-hunt atmosphere surrounding the Commission since it was formed last December. It was established after a Planning Ministry report accused NGOs of activities "prejudicial to national security, economic interests or public order". The new Commission has similarly vague and wide-ranging powers of enquiry and has granted special immunity relating to all oral or written evidence presented. Over 200 complaints and representations have been received by the enquiry, many of them anonymous.

Over 200 of Sri Lanka's 3,000 NGOs, including most foreign development agencies, have been sent a Commission

questionnaire asking for complete personnel and financial records. A second form sent to some NGOs asks for names and bank account numbers of employees' wives and children.

Local human rights NGOs say such information represents a potential "death list" for Sri Lanka's notorious security services and that it will be used either to curtail their activities or to cut foreign funding. The Government an-

nounced in mid March that Foreign Ministry clearance was now needed for all funds remitted to Sri Lanka from abroad.

One of the Commission's main targets appears to be the charismatic AT Ariyaratne, President of national development agency *Sarvodaya*. Observers say the agency's alleged financial support for the opposition SLFP during the 1989 Presidential election campaign has angered Mr Premadasa.

In a statement on 12 March, Mr Ariyaratne said there had been an organised campaign against him since Mr Premadasa came to power and welcomed the Commission as an opportunity to seek justice and fair play.

Sources say other NGOs may refuse to answer the questionnaire and will use the forthcoming public sessions as an opportunity for a showdown with the Commission. Others say there is a Buddhist lobby inside the Commission that aims to target agencies funded by foreign Christian NGOs.

After last year's World Bank meeting many donor governments planned to increase NGO support and cut back bilateral support to Sri Lanka. The Commission is clearly designed to kill many birds with one stone.

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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