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## Refugees returned to Trincomalee

RIDING a storm of criticism, the Indian ship *SS Akbar* docked at the port of Trincomalee on 22 January in the first movement of a joint Indo-Sri Lankan government programme to repatriate 30,000 of the 220,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in south India.

On board were 614 Tamil refugees, 400 of them government servants and their families who would have lost jobs and pension rights had they refused to return. India says the programme is voluntary and that the Sri Lankan government has guaranteed the returnees' safety but refugee workers in south India and Sri Lanka have voiced grave concern on both counts.

India has vowed to root out Tamil militancy in south India after former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated, allegedly by Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers (LTTE), near Madras last May. The 110,000 Sri Lankan refugees in government-run camps provide perfect cover for terrorist activity, Indian authorities claim.

India says over 30,000 refugees agreed

to return home after a survey early last year. Madras refugee agency OFERR believes few understood the English form circulated and some signed under duress. A second form in Tamil circulated in December was completed only by 10,000. Many may be swayed by the generous assistance package from the Sri Lankan government offering three months' food rations, Rs2,000 (\$50) and up to Rs20,000 to rebuild their homes and re-equip farms.

Relief workers in Trincomalee say conditions are too unstable throughout the north for refugees to return. Hours before the *SS Akbar* arrived, a Tiger ambush killed 20 soldiers near Kuchchaveli, a village an hour north of Trincomalee. The same day, a massive explosion ripped through Trincomalee airforce base at China Bay killing 21 people. Tight-lipped officials claim it was accidental, but investigations continue.

The Tigers have clearly signalled their opposition to the return programme, observers say, by visibly stepping up operations in the east. Deputy leader

*Mahataya* in a LTTE radio broadcast appealed to international refugee agency UNHCR to intervene, describing the repatriation as "an inhuman act". Sources say UNHCR has refused involvement in the programme, saying conditions are not conducive to safe return and that India refuses to allow UN monitoring at the point of departure. UNHCR runs two refugee camps in Mannar District where 14,000 refugees will return in a second phase of the programme beginning in February. UNHCR supervised the return of 25,000 Tamil refugees from south India in an earlier government-backed repatriation programme in 1988.

Sri Lankan Tamil MPs have also condemned the programme as "a propaganda exercise". Sinhalese MP for Trincomalee MKDS Gunasekera told parliament that community life had completely broken down in the district and that schools and villages were abandoned. District Army commander Brigadier Siri Pieris says fighting is restricted to jungle areas and there is a 30-mile safety zone around Trincomalee town. Relief workers say the risk to civilians comes as much from Army operations after Tiger attacks such as those around Sampur in late December when a number of villagers disappeared.

As a second group of 659 refugees from south India arrived in Trincomalee on 29 January, there was resentment among the 10,000 trapped in abject conditions in Trincomalee refugee camps such as Clappenberg. The new arrivals are housed in two hotels in Uppuveli and whisked out in three or four days to their home areas with supplies and money that the locally displaced are also entitled to. No-one is rushing to resettle them.

Refugee agencies also fear that the repatriation programme sets a dangerous precedent for the safety of 250,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in the West. S Siddarthan, leader of Tamil group PLOTE, an ally of the Sri Lankan Army, described them as "economic migrants" and said there was now no reason why they should not return.

## Enquiry blames Army for Kokkaddicholai massacre

IN A LANDMARK DECISION, the interim report of a Presidential Commission of Enquiry says Sri Lankan soldiers deliberately massacred 67 Tamil civilians at Kokkaddicholai in Batticaloa District last June after two soldiers were killed in a LTTE landmine blast. The Commission rejected the unsworn statement of an Army lieutenant who said the civilians died in crossfire. Another 17 soldiers refused to testify.

Observers say this is the first time the government has investigated military excesses so thoroughly. Five soldiers and one officer involved in the incident are currently in custody. While villagers will be compensated for loss of relatives and homes, there is no sign of senior Army officers being held responsible for the actions of their men.

Analysts say the interim report's purpose is to send a signal to international aid donors before a vital World Bank meeting that Sri Lanka will set its house in order. It is also a message to the military to keep troops in check while a sensitive refugee repatriation programme gets underway.

Batticaloa MP Pararajasingham Joseph, who filed the original Kokkaddicholai complaint, remains unconvinced. The Commission ruled out investigations over another 38 people still missing after the massacre. Another 20 people have disappeared in Batticaloa after Army cordon-and-search operations in the last two months, Mr Joseph told the BBC. Over 2,500 people have disappeared in Batticaloa District alone since the June 1990 war.

## JAFFNA

**Nowhere to run**

SRI LANKAN airforce planes dropped thousands of leaflets over Jaffna on 20 January warning people to flee to the Army-controlled islands west of the peninsula in preparation for a major military offensive. Tiger units went on maximum alert say LTTE sources and coastal villages and areas surrounding the Army's foothold on the peninsula, the port of Kankasanturai and the military airfield at Palaly, are heavily mined.

Eight Sri Lankan sailors died and 16 were wounded in a LTTE attack on the Karainagar naval base on 10 January. There were heavy clashes around Palaly a few days later as an Army column attempted to move out. Sources say thousands of Sri Lankan troops were airlifted into Palaly in mid-January in a four-day operation. Air and sea artillery attacks on civilian areas of Jaffna continue unabated.

Few civilians are likely to seek sanctuary in the western islands observers say. More than 360 people died on Kayts in the August 1990 Army attack and 210 are missing. Many more are feared dead after the new offensive last October. Jaffna government officials visiting Kayts during a lull in the fighting found 16 bodies stuffed in a well covered with compost. Their report says over 6,000 houses have been destroyed. All but 20,000 of the island's 120,000 population have fled since October.

Food and medical supplies in Jaffna remain critical and there is growing malnutrition among children, expectant mothers and the elderly. Over 250,000 refugees are in camps like Navatkuli where food rations are reduced to two kilos of rice and one kilo of flour a month and skin diseases are rife. After an Army ban on fishing over 200,000 fishermen

have lost their livelihood and day-wage labourers reduced to penury.

All three generators at the ICRC-run Jaffna hospital are under repair and the Army blockade lets only a trickle of basic medical supplies through. Hospital statistics show 830,000 people received treatment in 1991 - almost all Jaffna's normal population - and dysentery, cholera and malaria are on the increase. Four children died of diarrhoea in January and over 100 children from curable diseases in 1991 say the figures.

A delegation of Catholic clergy who visited Jaffna in late January say there is growing fear and trauma over the impending Army attack. A delegation of senior clerics from the Buddhist Maha Sangha also visited Army-controlled areas around Palaly and Karainagar this month and promised to submit their proposals for a peaceful settlement to President Premadasa.

Every day, hundreds of Jaffna civilians trek south wading knee-deep through Chundikulam lagoon at Kombady to reach the markets of Kilinochchi where a good rice harvest keeps a lifeline open. A bag of Kilinochchi rice sells at Rs 1,200 (\$30) on the Jaffna market. Air-dropped leaflets in late January ordered the route closed and heavy shelling from Elephant Pass has reduced traffic to a trickle.

Others are heading for Vavuniya and the south fleeing helicopter gunship attacks like those on Atchuveli and Vasavilan in late January as the Army extends its foothold eastwards. Analysts now predict the Jaffna offensive in late February or March after critical UN and World Bank meetings on Sri Lanka in Europe. Many more may flee Jaffna in the meantime.

**Exodus**

At least 16 Tamils were killed and another 90,000 fled the south Indian state of Karnataka in December after riots over disputed water rights to the Kaveri river shared with neighbouring Tamil Nadu.

**Abducted**

Amnesty International says *Shankar* of Tamil group EPRLF was abducted by eight armed men in Colombo on 18 December. Security forces in Amparai may want to question him about arms hidden before EPRLF cadres fled Sri Lanka in early 1990. EPRLF has also reported extensively on recent Army killings in the east.

**Detained**

Former DMK minister S Jagadeesan and her husband were charged by Tamil Nadu police in early January with involvement in the murder of EPRLF leader Padmanabha and 15 others in Madras in June 1990. Another 27 suspects are in custody.

**Casualties**

An estimated 4,274 LTTE guerrillas and 1,111 Sri Lankan soldiers have died in fighting in the past year, military sources in Colombo said in mid-January. No civilian casualty figures were released. Independent observers say at least 12,000 civilians have been killed since June 1990.

**Fire deaths**

A family of three Sri Lankan asylum-seekers died as fire swept through a refugee hostel in Lampertheim, 40 miles south of Frankfurt on 31 January. There has been a spate of neo-Nazi arson attacks on refugees in Germany.

## Questions of peace

A WARRANT issued in a Madras court on 31 January for the arrest of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran for involvement in the murder of Rajiv Gandhi emphatically rules out any further hopes of peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers, observers say. Tourism Minister S. Thondaman's projected visit to Jaffna in mid-January dissolved in a storm of controversy as his peace proposals leaked to the press were denounced as "a LTTE package". As the Sinhala backlash to Mr Thondaman's

proposals grew, Colombo's leading independent columnist Mervyn de Silva tabled a few well-chosen questions.

What is wrong with Mr Thondaman holding talks in Jaffna and bringing back the LTTE's counter-proposals or criticisms, as a European diplomat asked International Affairs adviser Bradman Weerakoon at a briefing in Colombo in early January. Surely common sense would dictate a positive approach to the Thondaman initiative whatever the response to the Thondaman agenda, asks

Mr de Silva. The Sinhala establishment could have seized the moral high ground in the run-up to the World Bank's Paris Aid Group meeting on 7 February, he says, instead of inflaming atavistic fears of national disintegration. While senior Buddhist cleric Ven. Madihe Pannatissa describes the Thondaman proposals as "the embodiment of *Eelam*", a separate state, author and commentator Reggie Siriwardena says they offer not even a fully fledged federation of the Swiss, Canadian or American kind.

## Tigers open a new front in the Hill Country

FEAR GRIPPED the Hill Country's Uva Province as police arrested over a hundred plantation youth in January for suspected LTTE links. Police say they are seeking another 72 youths for inquiries. Anthony Christopher, 23, released from police custody, died in hospital after being tortured, according to trade union sources.

Over 22,000 plantation workers in the Passara and Lunugala areas staged a strike on 9 January protesting against indiscriminate arrests. The following day a 15-member gang waylaid a jeep carrying

wages for plantation workers at Ella and snatched Rs1.2 million. Hindegala Estate Assistant Superintendent Dharshana Perera and a policeman were killed in the attack.

Police attributed the robbery to a LTTE unit from Batticaloa with a mission to destabilise the Hill Country and divert Army attention from the north. Following a security conference in Colombo on 13 January, the Army launched a massive operation in the Ella jungles. Police searched line rooms on

estates arresting workers. Police say they are still seeking LTTE suspects *Nagesh* and *Vishnu* from Batticaloa.

Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) General Secretary and State Minister M.S.Sellamy denied plantation workers were involved in militant activities and blamed "hidden elements working against the government". Trade unions say that many people were arrested solely because of Batticaloa connections.

Police arrested two LTTE leaders *Mani Master* and *Mahendran* in late January. Interrogation revealed that the LTTE had planned a simultaneous attack on all police stations in Badulla District. A police surveillance operation is also underway now in estate areas of Ratnapura.

The impending privatisation of estates also troubles plantation workers. The government plans to implement a World Bank recommendation, allocating over 400 estates to 22 private companies. While two major Unions, the CWC and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, support privatisation, fifteen other unions of the Joint Committee of Plantation Trade Unions (JCPTU) oppose the move. The JCPTU fears large scale retrenchment and plans a strike campaign. Unions estimate that 40% of the 4,000 staff grade and 200,000 of the one million plantation work-force will lose their jobs.

## *A bloody stalemate*

IN THE EAST, 19 months of Tiger attacks, Army operations, casual killings and disappearances have battered the people of Batticaloa and Amparai districts to their knees. After Tiger guerrillas killed seven soldiers guarding a Sinhalese village in Amparai on 9 January, Special Task Force (STF) units rounded up 135 villagers at Alaiyadivembu and Periyakulam. All but 20 were released to Akkaraipatru Citizens Committee. In a large-scale operation a few days later STF units captured a LTTE camp at Kanjikudichcharu recovering arms and food stocks. Another 12 people died when a bus carrying airforce personnel hit a Tiger landmine outside Arantalawa on 26 January.

Tension is high on the Muslim coastal belt of Kattankudy and Kalmunai after two cycle bombs killed four people and injured 23 others at Kattankudy and Arasady junction on 30 January. Police shot dead two LTTE cadre. Muslim Home Guards later attacked the Batticaloa-Kalmunai bus injuring civilians.

In Batticaloa, disappearances and random killings continue. The bullet-riddled bodies of four fishermen were found on the beach at Vahaneri in early January. Ten fishermen arrested a few days earlier have vanished without trace. Two men arrested and badly beaten by Muslim Home Guards in Eravur have also disappeared. Another 60 men were taken for questioning from a Tamil refugee camp in Kalmunai on 9 January. Only 58 returned.

In late January, 1,000 soldiers launched a massive cordon-and-search operation in Manmunai west of Batticaloa lagoon detaining civilians in Karaveddi and Thandiyady. Local sources reported heavy fighting around Sithandy further north where the Army captured a LTTE hospital base. To the west, on the strategic Welikande road, the Tigers again ambushed an Army patrol at Sinhapura on 29 January killing 13 soldiers. Batticaloa LTTE commander *Karikalan* reported killed in last month's fighting had a message for a Canadian MP delegation when they met in the Eravur jungles. The Army cannot defeat the LTTE he says and the LTTE cannot defeat the Army. So the Tigers are ready to talk.

## Preparing the ground

SOURCES say the second phase of the repatriation programme from south India will begin in mid-February when the first of 14,000 refugees from Mannar will return to Talaimannar in Indian trawlers. A programme of "normalisation" has begun across Mannar Island and there is growing pressure on 30,000 Muslim refugees in Puttalam to return.

Batches of public employees are being brought in by boat from Kalpitiya and schools renovated. Officials in Puttalam told relief workers on 27 December that 15,000 Muslim refugees must return to Mannar immediately but the movement has again been postponed.

East of Mannar island, the Army has stepped up operations on the mainland to link up with a military push from Vavuniya towards Madhu where 25,000

refugees shelter in a UN-run camp at Sri Lanka's most sacred Catholic shrine.

From a narrow neck of land on the coast, the Army has pushed up to Nanantan, an isolated village in open country. Nine soldiers and 20 LTTE cadres were killed in a Tiger counter-attack on 16 January. Madhu is only an hour away by road and reports say the Tigers have begun conscripting some of the 5,000 youth in the refugee camp as a last-ditch defence force.

The Army's control of the Mannar coastal strip remains fiercely contested. Air and sea artillery shelled the surrounding jungles as 150 LTTE guerrillas launched a full-scale assault on Vankalai Army camp on 31 January. Security sources say seven soldiers and 25 LTTE were killed.

SRI LANKA'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD UNDER SCRUTINY

# Damned with faint praise

Two crucial meetings in Europe next month put Sri Lanka's human rights record under the microscope. The UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva will hear a damning report from a UN team who visited the island in October. The World Bank's annual Paris Aid Group meeting on 7 February, where the international community pledges aid to Sri Lanka for the coming year, will also express concern over human rights. But what difference say frustrated activists is it likely to make?

SOURCES say Western countries concerned over Sri Lanka's human rights record will welcome Sri Lankan government measures to safeguard civil liberties at two key meetings next month but will push hard for further improvements while cutting back on foreign aid.

A report from the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances to be tabled at the UN Human Rights Commission in February says 12,000 people have disappeared in Sri Lanka since 1983, the highest number in over 40 countries surveyed by the UN team. The report blames police and Army death squads.

A European Parliament report published last year says over 60,000 people were killed or disappeared in Sri Lanka since 1987 in the Army's brutal contest with the southern Marxist insurgent People's Liberation Front (JVP).

Observers say the Australian and Canadian governments will promote a resolution at the Human Rights Commission calling for a visit to Sri Lanka by a UN Special Rapporteur on human rights issues. Since early last year Sri Lanka has made strenuous efforts to allay international concern over human rights, setting up a Presidential Commission on Disappearances and a Human Rights Task Force. In December, the government agreed to implement 28 of 32 recommendations after a visit by an Amnesty International team in June.

Human rights activists regard the measures as cosmetic and say the Presidential Commission has no mandate to investigate disappearances before 15 January 1991. Human Rights Task Force chairman JFA Soza told the press on 13 January that he was now actively engaged in monitoring safety of 4,475 detainees in police and Army camps, claiming all detainees had been individually interviewed. Other reports say more than 15,000 people are in custody in the aftermath of the JVP revolt and the continuing war in the north.

In early January, Sri Lanka's Parlia-

mentary Human Rights Committee urged President Premadasa to take up the case of 250 Tamil youths in Colombo's New Magazine prison, who were arrested when fighting with the LTTE flared up again in June 1990. Only four of the detainees have been produced in court, says the Committee. Police say another seven LTTE suspects were arrested in Colombo in mid-January. Over 100 detainees at a major detention camp at Boossa near Galle, staged a hunger strike in late January after food allowances were cut.

Rumours continue in the south of a JVP insurgency. Colombo plainclothes police arrested university lecturer Amal Illesinghe on 9 January for suspected links with the rebel movement. Another twelve suspected members of the JVP's military wing were arrested in late January, six in Colombo, one in Tangalle and another five in Karadeniya, where arms and ammunition were recovered.

The legacy of the pro-government vigilante groups still casts a long shadow. After a high-profile delegation of Canadian MPs visited an exhibition in Matara cataloguing human rights abuses, armed men in military clothing stormed the building smashing exhibits and injuring

several organisers. The Canadian delegation described Sri Lanka's human rights record as "unacceptable" and will release a hard-hitting report in the Canadian parliament a strategic three days before the World Bank meeting.

In a further measure to meet international criticism, Colombo has retired police chief Premadasa Udugampola, accused of running death squads in Kandy and the south at the height of the JVP insurgency. But Sri Lankan opposition politicians have accused another eight senior police officers of 30 human rights crimes in a dossier forwarded to the Paris Aid Group meeting. Lalith Athulathmudali, leader of the new breakaway Democratic United National Front (DUNF), denies he is lobbying to stop aid to Sri Lanka but says he will continue to highlight threats to democracy.

Observers say international criticism over human rights at the World Bank meeting will be muted but that a number of countries in a change of tactics will damn Sri Lanka with faint praise - welcoming measures introduced to safeguard human rights while cutting back on bilateral aid until further improvements occur. Britain, Norway and Holland have been mentioned but analysts say European countries contributed only 10% of Sri Lanka's foreign aid pledges last year while the big donors, Japan (37%), the Asian Development Bank (21%) and the World Bank itself (22%) are seemingly impervious to human rights concerns.

The World Bank may have more immediate problems trying to spur Sri Lanka into the last leg of a painful three-year programme to stabilise the economy. On the agenda this year are depreciation of the rupee, restricting the budget deficit to 8% of GNP, privatisation of state banks and the estate sector and more cost-effective welfare programmes. The World Bank recommends donors commit \$800 million next year - \$630 million in project aid and \$170 million in balance-of-payments assistance. Last year's economic performance was mixed. While there was a growth rate of 6% an inflation rate of 12% on top of 1990's 21.5% means the value of money has depreciated by a third in two years. Public sector spending and defence expenditure must be cut back, analysts say, to rein in inflation.

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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