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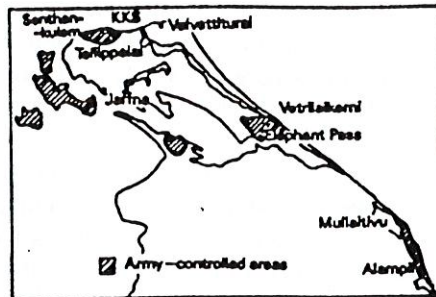
The battle for Jaffna

OVER 5,000 Sri Lankan soldiers sealed off Jaffna in a major operation east of Elephant Pass on 28 June, designed to trap the leaders of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) inside an Army cordon closing around the peninsula.

Troops landed at Vetrilaikerni on the east coast secured a seven-kilometre stretch of road to Elephant Pass pushing north through Mullian into Tenmaratchchi. A second Army column is pushing south towards the strategic market town of Kilinochchi. In the first five days of fighting, defence sources say, 330 LTTE cadre and 33 soldiers were killed while LTTE radio in Jaffna said only 17 Tigers died. There are no independent reports of the fighting or civilian casualty figures. Among those killed in the Vetrilaikerni advance was Alagar, editor of LTTE newspaper Eelanatham.

This latest offensive shuts off the last civilian exit route from the peninsula through Chundikulam and after the Army's advance to Tellippalai and Thondmanaru last month, it is clear that the battle for Jaffna has begun in earnest.

The military's current objective is the LTTE radar station and naval base at Mathagal, due west of Army-controlled Kankasanturai. Sri Lankan forces fought a pitched battle on 12 June for the nearby



coastal village of Senthankulam where there is a strategic break in treacherous offshore reefs that would allow a large-scale troop landing. Heavy shelling of civilian areas south of Keerimalai continues.

East of Thondamanaru bridge, the Army's next target is Valvettiturai, the symbolic epicentre of the Tiger movement and the birthplace of LTTE leader Prabhakaran. Defence sources admitted in early July that Prabhakaran had slipped through the Army cordon into Mullaitivu but the truth is they do not know whether he has left Jaffna or not. Others say he will stay and fight.

Analysts say the Army's strategy is a series of zig-zag strikes inside the peninsula masking a progressive encirclement of Jaffna town. Before attempting to take the town it must force out most of the population into the western islands or

vast new refugee camps around Kilinochchi by cutting off food supplies. The Army must reach the gates of Jaffna before the October monsoon rains. A strategic pause to enforce a humanitarian evacuation of the city allows the taking of Jaffna to be presented as a political and a military success at the next World Bank donors meeting in Paris later in the year. All this is of course theory. The practice threatens to be more problematic. But observers believe the Tellippalai offensive shows the Indian blockade of the Palk Strait has sapped the Tigers' firepower and two years of war have decimated their ranks. Most of the boys who died at Tellippalai were 12 or 13 years old.

Jaffna residents say there is now regular shelling of the town at night from Palaly and Mandaitivu. Many spend the night camped close to the ICRC-run Jaffna hospital which is a demilitarised zone.

Jaffna's Government Agent says there are 12,000 tons of food aid stockpiled in the peninsula but food prices are rising as panic sets in. After last month's Army offensive, Tellippalai Multi Purpose Cooperative Stores, the government's relief distribution point has come to a standstill. Most of the 80,000 local residents have fled the area leaving behind ration cards and food stamps.

Over 250,000 of Jaffna's one million population are now internal refugees, pushed back and forward by bombing and Army offensives, flooding the courtyards of temples, churches and schools. But there are no safe havens. Another four people were killed and 20 injured when Ilavalai Hindu College and the Good Shepherd Girls College were shelled on 11 June.

As the Army edges closer to Jaffna town, the pressure grows on a million people imprisoned by deprivation, disease and dreams of liberation. For the Jaffna civilian the nightmare has only just begun.

☐ AS THE NOOSE tightens on Jaffna, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has dissolved the PFLT, the LTTE's political wing in preparation for a back-to-the-wall military struggle for the peninsula. Local-level village councils are also dissolved, placing all authority in the military wing. All Tiger Exit Visas from Jaffna are suspended. In Colombo, the poker game over peace moves drags on after eight Tamil political parties met President Premadasa on 15 June proposing a four point peace package. There was frustration as President Premadasa called on the LTTE to submit peace proposals to the parliamentary Select Committee set up last August to solve the ethnic question, potentially delaying recommendations which the President has agreed to honour. The Select Committee will sit in session for seven days from 29 June but observers say it gives Mr Premadasa the necessary breathing space to pursue the military option. The Tigers have submitted at least four sets of peace proposals this year which the Committee has refused to acknowledge.

REFUGEES

Repatriation programme suspended after UN protest

INDIA has suspended its controversial programme to repatriate 230,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in south India after protests from United Nations refugee agency UNHCR.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Mrs Sadako Ogata, wrote to Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in early May after UNHCR staff on Mannar Island reported mounting cases of forcible return among the 23,000 Sri Lankan refugees repatriated since January.

India says there is no policy of forced repatriation but admits to "isolated cases of excessive zeal by some local officials". UNHCR originally refused to participate in the programme citing the unstable security situation and New Delhi's refusal to allow UN monitoring of returnees in south India. Because of "overriding humanitarian concern" UNHCR now says it will monitor camps for returnees in Trincomalee and Vavuniya and build a new UN refugee centre north of Madhu where 30,000 are internally displaced by the war.

Observers say India in return will allow UNHCR a token presence in Tamil Nadu to monitor the voluntary nature of return. India suspended the programme in late May over security fears for Mr Premadasa's Presidential Mobile Secretariat in Vavuniya, and citing bad weather in the Palk Strait will not resume repatriations until September.

In the meantime, 95,000 Sri Lankan refugees in south India are being regrouped in government-run camps by village of origin in preparation for their return. Protest fasts have begun at Kottapattu camp in Tiruchirapalli where refugee children are studying in local schools. Ten people have been hospitalised and

another eight arrested. Those who have already returned to Sri Lanka are resigned and cynically realistic. They are the poorest of the poor who cannot afford to reject the promise of over Rs20,000 government assistance to rebuild their homes and their lives. Few have received more than Rs500. When their rations were stopped in south India or they watched camp inmates beaten for protesting, they knew it was wiser to go. They know they are only pawns in this game and as the backlash continues in south India against Rajiv Gandhi's murder that they have overstayed their welcome.

The Sri Lankan government who promised the returnees security and that they could return to their homes have provided little or nothing. Over 7,000 of the returnees have simply moved from one camp to another with the same meagre rations and insanitary conditions. Over 500 returnees sheltering in St Joseph's Technical College Trincomalee cannot go home to Veeranagar because local politicians have helped tough Sinhalese fishermen from Negombo to occupy their houses as part of a deliberate policy of colonisation.

On Mannar Island over 5,000 returnees cannot go to their homes because they are destroyed, occupied by the Army, or in LTTE-controlled territory. The northern half of the island between Talaimannar and Pesalai remains a security zone where civilians can be shot if they leave the road. Raja Pradhap a 22 year-old refugee was shot dead close to the UNHCR camp at Pesalai on 13 June. A LTTE communique found by his body branded him as an Army spy.

Deluge

More than 14 people were killed and 200,000 made homeless when 494 millimetres of rain fell on Colombo on 5 June over a 12 hour period, the heaviest recorded rainfall since 1876. Damage is currently estimated in billions of Rupees.

Victims

Sources in Jaffna say V Senthana, brother-in-law of one of the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) group has been abducted by the Tigers to put pressure on UTHR whose reports highlight LTTE and Army killings. Over 15 people were publicly executed by the LTTE in Jaffna in the last six weeks.

Birthright

Tourism minister S Thondaman has appealed to India to grant citizenship to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who do not wish to return and for 84,000 plantation Tamils to be given Sri Lankan citizenship in a reciprocal move.

Statistics

Sri Lankan defence sources say that in 150 days of fighting this year 507 soldiers, 350 civilians and 1,153 Tigers have been killed. Another 500 LTTE were wounded. Other sources say over 6,000 Sri Lankan soldiers have been wounded since the June 1990 war began.

Outcry

One person died and 14 were injured in Colombo and the south during an opposition-inspired *Jana Gosh* or "noise protest" against government policies organised by SLFP MP Mahinda Rajapakse on 1 July.

the buffer zone

RELIEF AGENCIES say displaced Tamil villagers are being forced back to their home areas to act as a buffer zone between the Army and Tiger guerrillas.

Over 100 families from Cheddikulam south-west of Vavuniya have been pushed back into makeshift huts in no-mans land between the Army camp and the Tiger-held jungles beyond. Sri Lankan soldiers burned the village and beheaded 25 people in a gruesome massacre in July 1990.

In Kovilady refugee camp at Tham-

balakamam south of Trincomalee, refugees from Kinniyai are being forced back to their homes to deter LTTE attacks on nearby Muslim villages. Local Tamils remain captive in Kovilady while the Army confiscates the rich harvest from the surrounding rice fields.

Further north at Kuchchaveli the Army stands guard over 100 Muslim villagers who rebuild their homes by day and sleep in the Army camp at night. Trincomalee wants to resettle "model villages" with equal numbers of Tamils,

Muslims and Sinhalese but critics say this is a cover for colonisation. Moving in the Muslims first means the Tamils fear to return. Kuchchaveli is no model village, relief workers say but a virtual battle zone and the scene of several large-scale LTTE ambushes.

Hundreds of Tamil refugees from the Alanchipotana massacre in April who fled to Batticaloa have been forced back to their villages by the military. The Army is not there to protect them, they are there to protect the Army.

Tamil civilians defy Tiger gunmen over Muslim killings

Batticaloa strikes back

ON 2 June, Rajakulendran a young Tamil was shot dead by the LTTE after he refused to leave a bus full of Muslims ambushed by the Tigers at Komari in Amparai District. More than 15 Muslims were killed and 25 wounded as the Tigers sprayed the bus with automatic weapons.

Two weeks later over 100 eastern Muslims were saved when Tamil passengers defied Tiger gunmen who stopped the Batticaloa-Colombo train at Sathurukondan.

There is a new wave of revulsion and resistance among Tamils over continuing LTTE attacks on Muslims designed to drive the two communities apart.

But tension remains high in the ethnically-mixed coastal villages north and south of Batticaloa. After a series of reprisal killings of Tamils, diplomatic missions in Colombo have called for the Army-backed Muslim Home Guards to be dis-

banded. Casual killings and disappearances continue. Unknown gunmen stopped a local bus at Kirankulam south of Batticaloa on 14 June, abducting 16 passengers including women and old men. Batticaloa Peace Committee say over 3,000 people have disappeared since the June 1990 war.

The Tamil-Muslim rift has brought business life to a standstill. Over 70% of Batticaloa's rich rice lands west of the lagoon remain unploughed as Muslim landlords or Tamil tenants are chased out. Army edicts also desolate thousands of acres as villagers are forbidden to cultivate to prevent the harvest going to the Tigers.

To the North of Batticaloa in the LTTE stronghold of Vakaraai, Army operations and starvation have forced thousands from their villages. Over 80,000 of Batticaloa's 200,000 popula-

tion are officially refugees but relief agencies say closer to 150,000 are displaced. There are now mounting fears over the long-term effects of two years of hunger and deprivation. Over 35% of patients recently admitted to Batticaloa hospital suffer from chronic malnutrition.

The fragile Polonnaruwa road link to Colombo remains a prime LTTE target. Another six soldiers died in a Tiger ambush at Sinhapura on 25 June. West of the lagoon LTTE Batticaloa commander *Karuna* is the law. His deputy *David* has a new list of 20 prominent businessmen ripe for kidnapping and ransom as LTTE fundraising gathers pace.

From its isolated camps in the interior at Kokkaddicholai and Unnichchai the Army is overstretched and jumpy. After cordon-and-search operations in villages around Nellikadu on 26 June ten farmers were shot dead by the Army and their bodies burned in nearby fields. Another 13 villagers were taken away.

Further south in remote Amparai District the cat-and-mouse game continues. Sri Lankan forces overran LTTE's *Vijayan* base near Akkaraipatru in early June seizing arms and food stocks. In the Tigers' monsoon stronghold of Kanchikudichcharu, five police commandos of the Special Task Force died in an LTTE ambush.

Ashraff appeals

SRI LANKA Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader MEH Ashraff has called for increased relief assistance for over 75,000 Muslim refugees driven from the North by a Tiger ultimatum in September 1990. In a communique to President Premadasa at the Mobile Secretariat in Vavuniya in late May, Mr Ashraff suggests creating a separate Muslim division of the Mannar District and a new Muslim colony in Vavuniya District for the former inhabitants of 20 isolated northern Muslim hamlets. There are over 40,000 Mannar Muslims in 70 makeshift refugee camps further south in Puttalam say NGOs. For the last six months, the govern-

ment has been trying to force them to return by threatening to cut off their dry rations. Government employees and teachers are threatened with dismissal. There is a growing fear among Puttalam Tamils that the Muslims are here to stay and will tilt the district's fragile ethnic balance. Local NGOs and Mannar's Rural Development Foundation have been told to keep their assistance low-key so as not to inflame local sentiment and to force the refugees to go home.

Another 180,000 of the Eastern Province's 300,000 Muslims are refugees and urgently need help said Relief and Rehabilitation Organisation (RRO) President Sir Abdul Ameer in a meeting with other Muslim leaders in Mecca during the recent Haj pilgrimage. Sri Lanka's eastern Muslims also want a separate ruling body as part of the four-point devolution package put to President Premadasa by Tamil political parties and the SLMC in mid-June.

The relief of Mannar

FOOD PRICES have fallen on Mannar Island after Government Agent (GA) K Ganesh persuaded the LTTE to allow rice and vegetables from mainland parts of the district to be brought in by boat. The agreement also provides a valuable market for the district's farmers who have had a bumper harvest.

Mannar Island has been under a Tiger blockade since a daring landmine attack outside Thallady Army camp in January closed the road link to the mainland. All food and other supplies were brought in by naval convoy from the south and there were mounting fears over medical shortages. GA Ganesh has also won grudging agreement from both sides to open up travel to the mainland through the LTTE port of Vidattativu further north.

Local services have struggled to deal

with the 9,000 refugees who have returned from south India since January. Many are from the mainland and anxious to return home. The Army also wants hundreds at Sunny Village refugee camp to return to Vankalai and stabilise the Army's foothold on the mainland. Many fear to return, remembering the four Tamil school teachers murdered by the Army, their bodies stuffed in a Vankalai well in reprisal for a Tiger attack last year.

The island remains tense after a number of abductions after dark in Mannar town. Tamil group TELO supporting the Army have denied responsibility. Four soldiers died and six were wounded in a LTTE attack close to the town on 9 June. Authorities say special identity cards will now be issued to 2,500 local government officials and fishermen.

Task Force without teeth

SINCE the inception of Sri Lanka's first Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) last August, there have been no disappearances from official detention centres or attacks on released detainees, says a HRTF progress report published in June.

HRTF, a government initiative led by former High Court Judge J.F.A. Soza monitors the welfare of 5,865 detainees in five camps and nine rehabilitation centres in the aftermath of the three-year insurgency by the southern Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) in which 40,000 died or disappeared.

HRTF now plans to provide legal aid to over 300 detainees to file fundamental rights applications before the Supreme Court to challenge the validity of their detention. Earlier this year Sri Lanka's Attorney General threw out charges against 2,000 JVP detainees, citing insufficient evidence but they remain in custody under Emergency laws. Another 7,000 detainees have been released and officially rehabilitated.

Human rights NGOs say however there are another 5,000 unofficial detainees held in police stations and Army camps known colloquially as "mas kade" - the beef stall. HRTF they say is window dressing, a task force without teeth. Unofficial detainees are spirited out the back door of police stations while HRTF are kept waiting in the compound.

In the east since the June 1990 war, lawyers say over 5,000 people have disappeared and less than 100 habeas corpus applications lodged. In Batticaloa town at the notorious Forestry Department office known locally as "Belsen", detainees are regularly tortured and disappeared. After separate visits by a Norwegian Human Rights delegation and HRTF, diplomatic missions in Colombo have agreed to fund a new HRTF office in Batticaloa.

In the south, detainees disappear before and after release but in reduced numbers as the JVP threat evaporates. Police shot dead three escapees from Pallakelle detention camp on 17 June.

Another six eluded capture. A week later, in a clash at Boosa detention camp between JVP and other detainees one person was killed and over 100 injured after police opened fire. At the second annual convention of the Mothers Front in Colombo on 23 June, 3,000 grieving relatives of the disappeared heard prominent Sri Lankan women such as Badulla SLFP MP Hema Ratnayake, her husband killed in the 1989 general election, and Dr Manorani Saravanamuttu, mother of murdered journalist Richard de Zoysa, call for the defeat of the present government before it "destroyed new lives".

The Mothers Front wants an independent Commission to investigate all disappearances since 1988. The state-run Disappearances Commission has no mandate to investigate disappearances cases before January 1991 and has held public hearings on only three cases in the last 18 months. Bereaved father S W Subasinghe collapsed and died of a heart attack during the Mothers Front meeting.

Fortress Europe slams the gates on asylum-seekers

AFTER a record 550,000 asylum-seekers arrived in European countries last year, Switzerland will pioneer a new voluntary return programme for refugees targeting 20,000 Sri Lankan Tamils, sources in Geneva say.

Swiss government officials who outlined the proposals at one of a regular series of inter-government consultations on refugees on 22 June, argue that Colombo and other southern areas of Sri Lanka offer an internal flight alternative allowing refused asylum-seekers to be safely returned.

Observers say many European countries will follow suit including Germany, which ratified tough new asylum laws this month to confine all asylum applicants to government-run camps and expedite all refugee claims within six weeks. Those refused will be deported.

Less than 5% of most asylum seekers including Sri Lankan Tamils gain full refugee status in European countries. Most are given a de facto or temporary status allowing them to be returned to their country when conditions improve. Few of those refused are deported while lengthy legal appeals continue. All this

will change say asylum experts with the introduction of new "fast-track" legislation throughout Europe.

Only France has no two-tier system, granting full refugee status to 68% of 3,398 Tamil asylum-seekers in 1991. But stories in *Le Monde* this month on LTTE

militants extorting taxes from over 60,000 Tamils in France have hardened official attitudes. A 55-page report of a recent mission to Sri Lanka by senior French immigration officials which rejects the internal flight alternative for Tamil asylum-seekers, has been suppressed and its authors discredited.

Britain, with 20,000 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers, plans tough new asylum laws later this year. British Refugee Council director Alf Dubs launched a new Refugee Charter for Europe on 1 July calling on governments to respect basic human rights of asylum-seekers, especially the right of appeal before deporting refused cases.

But a cold wind of change is blowing through Europe, observers say, with growing asylum numbers and the increasing criminalisation of the refugee-sending process. For hundreds of young Tamils marooned in slum hotels in Bangkok until Colombo "travel agents" extort an extra Rs100,000 (\$2,500) from their families, there will be no welcome in Europe. As organised crime swells the numbers, genuine refugees will be ignored in the gathering hysteria.

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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