

Death on the lagoon

OVER 100 civilians fleeing Jaffna have died since early January in the nightly struggle for control of the strategic Jaffna lagoon as amphibious units of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) battle it out with the Sri Lankan Navy to keep a vital supply corridor open to the peninsula.

Sri Lankan defence sources say over 50 LTTE boats were destroyed in a string of clashes throughout February. In one encounter, 40 LTTE were killed and six boats destroyed. Local reports say the dead are mostly civilians escaping the 33-month blockade designed to starve the separatist LTTE into submission. Over 50 people died in a Navy attack in mid-lagoon on 2 January, their bodies mutilated and robbed of jewellery say reports by survivors. The Colombo-based Civil Rights Movement has called for an independent enquiry into the Kilali killings.

Every night as darkness falls, hundreds gather at Kilali and Alankerni fleeing south or returning with a lifeline of a sack of rice or a few thousand rupees sent by a relative abroad. After a major firefight there is no crossing for several days. Thousands crossed the lagoon on 28 February after LTTE units badly damaged a naval fast attack craft killing ten sailors.

The military is determined to break the Kilali run and the vital supply corridor that keeps the Jaffna economy an inch away from collapse. The Tigers likewise refuse to allow the Army-controlled Elephant Pass land route few miles east, to be opened to civilian traffic fearing a large-scale offensive by the Sri Lankan ground forces. A further round of talks between the LTTE and international refugee agency UNHCR to open up a

LTTE leader offers peace talks in BBC interview

relief corridor through the peninsula's western crossing at Sangupiddy will take place in March.

The Army's 20 km grip on the peninsula south of Kankasanturai remains fiercely contested. Ten Sri Lankan soldiers were killed by the LTTE's elite *Charles Anthony Brigade* near Pandatharippu in early February. A high-profile Army offensive launched around Mathagal on 23 February yielded little visible territorial gain. Aerial attacks on the north continue. Sri Lankan jets strafed Kilinochchi on 12 February injuring 11 people including three female students as bombs hit St Theresa's school. Sri Lankan pilots have now finished training on a new squadron of Pucara fighter planes bought from Argentina at \$75 million each.

Food prices have spiralled again in Jaffna and there were posters and demonstrations calling for Government Agent (GA) Mr K Manickavasagar's resignation. Reports say the LTTE is holding his family hostage until he quits. The GA heads a phalanx of civil servants, unpaid for many months, supplying food aid to only the 30% of Jaffna's one million population who are officially displaced by the fighting, while the Army works overtime to displace the rest.

Rehabilitation Secretary Christie Silva braved a storm of questions in Colombo in late February after he admitted sending less than 5,000 tons of food aid north every month, 50% of the GA's estimate. Over 9,000 tons was now on its way including 6,000 tons of rice said Mr Silva. Observers say both sides liberally

on sending \$6 million worth of food every month across the front line to a population it is trying to starve into submission. Sooner or later they will have to drop the charade, say hard-liners in the south and put the country on a war footing.

Relief workers say Jaffna now faces a new crisis to secure food and medical supplies. Thousands of families below the poverty line are already destitute. Day-wage labourers, fishermen and poor artisans, thrown out of work by the war, have no wages to buy rice at Rs60 a kilo or kerosene at Rs140 a bottle and no savings to fall back on. Some 140 people died in Jaffna hospital last month many of them through lack of basic drugs. Among them were 12 children.

A delegation of international aid agencies working in the north was refused Army permission in late February to cross into LTTE-controlled areas of Jaffna to ascertain current conditions.

In a wide-ranging BBC interview in Jaffna in late February, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran condemned Western countries for indirectly funding the Sri Lankan war effort through foreign aid and said the LTTE was willing to consider federal proposals that recognised the Tamil homeland and to open unconditional peace talks.

Pro-government newspapers in Colombo described the offer as a sign of weakness and a signal that the Tigers were in trouble. Tamil parties such as EPRLF and TULF welcomed Prabhakaran's initiative but government spokesman Ranil Wickremasinghe would say only that the Tigers should join the Parliamentary Select Committee process set up 20 months ago to solve the ethnic crisis.

Mr Prabhakaran's interview has effectively pre-empted the long-delayed Select Committee report which observers say is unlikely to offer the Tamils any real autonomy or a merged North-East Province.

Anglican Bishop of Colombo Rev Kenneth Fernando, who met LTTE leader Prabhakaran in a surprise visit to Jaffna in January, plans a second mission shortly leading an inter-religious delegation including senior Buddhist clergy. Bishop Fernando says there is now growing potential for a negotiated political settlement. In a reciprocal gesture, after Bishop Fernando arranged the release of two policemen held by the LTTE, the Army set free 20 Tiger suspects in Jaffna on 4 February, Sri Lanka's Independence Day.

plunder food aid. A Colombo police investigation is now underway into missing relief consignments and the Tigers routinely confiscate around 30% in Jaffna. No one knows how long the government will go

NORTH BY NORTH-WEST

Hearts and minds

A new Rehabilitation Task Force is needed to help civilians in "cleared" areas recently captured from the LTTE, Vavuniya Army Commander Brigadier D Kalupahana told visiting journalists in late February. Phase four of *Operation Black Fox* had just cleared 45 sq km west of Vavuniya around Manipuram bringing 400 scared families under Army control.

Military commitment to "hearts and minds" approaches comes only after prolonged air strikes and armoured offensive. Bombers pounded Omantai as *Black Fox* got underway, killing two civilians and injuring six others. In many cleared areas of Vavuniya, Mannar and Trincomalee, Tamil villagers are forced to remain or are forced back to their home areas to act as a buffer zone between the Army and Tiger guerrillas.

In Mannar, Bishop R Joseph warned that the security of returning villagers must come before the current military objectives behind resettlement, at a conference in early February. Most of northern Mannar Island remains a no-go area of deserted villages and ruined houses that the Army wants to reclaim. Mannar's Army Commander has suspended sea travel from the island to the LTTE-controlled port of Vidaltivu on the mainland. Sri Lanka aircraft bombed Iluppaikadavai seven miles north of the port in late February killing three and injuring 11 civilians.

The Army has only a slender foothold on the Mannar mainland to the edge of Giants Tank which irrigates acres of fertile rice lands beyond. Some 37 families are already marked for resettlement in nearby Murunkan. A few miles away, LTTE units attacked Army positions at Nanattan on 24 February, killing five soldiers and injuring nine. Between Giants Tank and Vavuniya is 500 sq km of

LTTE-controlled scrub land and forest where international refugee agency UNHCR runs a camp for 30,000 displaced at Madhu, Sri Lanka's most sacred Catholic shrine.

Southwest at isolated Cheddikulam where the tangled razor wire of the Army's Forward Defence Line reappears, UNHCR has intervened to move 250 people 4 kms west, away from their buffer position between the Army camp and the LTTE-controlled jungles.

In a surprise reversal of policy, Sri Lankan authorities announced in mid-February that refugees could now return to uncleared or LTTE-controlled areas of the north. Local government officials would supply them with dry rations. NGOs say the move is largely aimed at the 7,000 of 29,000 refugees repatriated from India in 1992 who remain in reception centres in Mannar, Vavuniya and Trincomalee. India wants the repatriation to recommence and the reception centres must be cleared for new arrivals.

Officials say over 22,000 returnees have been resettled in cleared areas but there is little sign of them. At least 2,000 have returned to LTTE-controlled Kilinochchi increasing pressure on local NGOs. UNHCR is working on a new range of quick impact projects to supply temporary shelter while villagers rebuild their homes.

After NGO protests Trincomalee's hard-line Brigadier agreed to drop plans to resettle locally displaced people in eight villages by early February. Security in many areas such as Kuchchaveli is still uncertain and in Thambalakamam local Army officers will not relinquish their grip on rich rice lands they are harvesting. The civilians' dilemma is whether the Army is there to protect them, or they are there to protect the Army.

Charges

The LTTE's International Secretariat lodged a petition with the United Nations in New York on 5 February accusing India of gross violation of international law and involvement in the death of Central Committee member *Kittu* in an explosion at sea, nine miles off Madras.

Attack

Prominent journalist-in-exile DBS Jeyaraj the editor of Canadian Tamil newspaper *Senthamarai* suffered multiple fractures after an attack by a Tamil gang wielding baseball bats outside the Ontario Science Centre on 14 February.

Crackdown

Madras police arrested over 50 LTTE suspects in mid-February in a new security crackdown in south India. Surveillance in the Palk Strait has been stiffened and 80 Tamil Nadu fishermen in 15 boats were detained off Kachchativu by Sri Lankan naval units.

Impunity

Father of four, Ratnayake Wijesuriya was awarded Rs 27,000 (\$600) by Colombo Supreme Court in mid-February after Homagama police pulled out his teeth with pliers and burned his gums with cigarette butts, following his arrest in April 1990. A police officer was fined Rs 5,000 (\$110).

Deported

Some 95 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers were deported from Romania on 1 March after being sentenced to a year in prison last November for entering the country illegally. Ten were held in custody on arrival in Colombo.

Limbo

THE NEXT PHASE of the controversial inter-governmental programme repatriating Sri Lankan Tamil refugees from south India remains suspended while Indian officials wrangle with shipowners over transport arrangements. Sri Lankan officials announced earlier that 6,000 refugees had voluntarily registered to return beginning in mid-February.

UN refugee agency UNHCR which is monitoring the programme now has an office in Madras and has produced a booklet in English and Tamil circulating in refugee camps outlining reception

assistance in Sri Lanka and saying UNHCR will protect refugees being returned to their country against their will.

NGOs say that many of the 29,000 refugees who returned to war-torn northern Sri Lanka on the programme last year were coerced by hostile camp officials or lured by promises of rehabilitation grants never paid out. India has now stopped letters from Sri Lanka arriving at Tamil Nadu refugee camps after disillusioned returnees wrote to relatives in south India warning them not to come back.

India has refused UNHCR access to the camps and the UN agency is unable to provide refugees with information on the situation in their home country, one of UNHCR's traditional protection functions say NGOs who were critical of the current programme at a meeting in Geneva on 11 February. When relief agencies query the wisdom of returning refugees to areas where a civil war is raging or question the level of rehabilitation assistance provided, Indian and Sri Lankan officials say that the programme is being "supervised by the UN".

■ President visits Amparai ■ Prime Minister visits Batticaloa

Campaigning on the eastern front

FIRE swept through Karaitivu refugee camp in isolated Amparai District on 11 February killing two children and destroying 15 houses after a Special Task Force (STF) operation arrested over 300 Tamil men in the camp. The STF have denied arson but Tamil MP Mavai Senathirajah has demanded an inquiry.

Speaking in Akkaraipatru on 27 February, President Premadasa urged Tamils and Muslims to submit proposals to the Parliamentary Select Committee for ethnic harmony between the communities and promised speedy rehabilitation once peace was achieved. Coastal areas were saturated with troops for Mr Premadasa's visit and arrests continued in Tamil villages.

Representatives of 5,000 displaced

civilians in 24 camps in Amparai District told Mr Premadasa that refugees were arrested arbitrarily and forced to work in Army camps. Local farmers could not market rice because rice mills were being bought up to service Mr Premadasa's ambitious plan to build 200 textile factories.

Conditions in Batticaloa continue to deteriorate despite attempts by government officials to present an improved image during Prime Minister DB Wijetunge's visit on 1 March. Batticaloa is now a hive of activity preparing for the Presidential Secretariat visit in July.

Army officers say north Batticaloa is under full military control and have advised the North-East Provincial Council to begin reconstruction.

According to Government Agent R Mohanagurusamy, 7,000 refugees currently in Polonnaruwa District will be resettled in Batticaloa before the Presidential Secretariat. Train services to Colombo have been resumed and modern public facilities will be installed in Batticaloa town.

Conditions in refugee camps north of Manmunai have deteriorated and Batticaloa officials say there are no funds for basic maintenance. Another 1,000 people in Periyaporativu, south of Batticaloa, lack basic food and shelter. Farmers told a visiting opposition delegation in early February that Airforce personnel were illegally levying Rs 3 on every bag of rice brought into Batticaloa town. The Army has ordered private tuition agencies to provide lists of students for special identity cards to prevent LTTE infiltration.

Student Pakiyaraj Kavitha died in crossfire when the LTTE attacked an Army patrol at Arayampathy, two miles south of Batticaloa, on 6 February. Soldiers arrested three persons at Arayampathy and several youths from the adjoining Kirankulam village. Defence sources say three LTTE cadre were shot dead at Vavunativu on 13 February and another Tiger was killed at Mavilaru. The following day the STF detained seven persons in Pandiruppu. A soldier was killed when LTTE attacked an Army camp in Aralamvila in Welikande area in late February.

Broken promises

OVER 10,000 plantation workers in Ratnapura District went on strike on 2 March demanding the restoration of wage levels reduced since the privatisation of tea and rubber estates in mid-1992. Private companies now managing plantations have reneged on promises to preserve existing wage and welfare deals. Plantation trade unions say workers now have only 18 days work a month instead of 25. Wages have fallen from Rs 1,560 to Rs 1,339, cancelling out a 30% increase last November. The cost of living allowance was frozen in January and the workload has increased. Workers on 52 estates run by two state corporations have been refused the wage rise and trade unions are up in arms over other plans to mortgage corporation property worth over Rs 1 billion for Rs 408 million.

As discontent spread, workers on some estates refused to be paid and 18 trade unions of the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee, warned Minister Rupa Karunatileke that strike action was on the cards. The government is reluctant to enforce agreements on work and wages because of World Bank demands to cut costs which President Premadasa says run to monthly losses of Rs400 million (\$10 million). The wages fiddle has embarrassed the powerful pro-government Ceylon Workers Congress led by Tourism Minister S Thondaman, which supports privatisation. Mr Thondaman has threatened non-cooperation and is said to be "breathing fire" at government officials.

Security operations continue. In early February, five Tiger suspects were arrested on an estate in Awissawella. Trade unions have repeatedly raised the issue of 37 Plantation Tamil youths in detention without charge or trial in Colombo's Magazine prison. Human rights agencies say over 1,500 Tamil youths are held in Magazine and Kalutara prisons.

Lower depths

ALMOST 100,000 Tamils have arrived in Colombo since June 1990 fleeing the North-East war where they form a new underclass of suspects for security forces who run a flourishing racket extorting money from detainees' families, reports say.

Many are birds of passage seeking to flee abroad or to return north with a lifeline of funds wired by anxious relatives abroad. Others seek refuge with relatives among the 150,000 Tamils who are part of the capital's 600,000 population.

The most vulnerable are those without friends or relatives forced to stay in one of the unlicensed lodging houses or "lodges" mushrooming all over the city. For Rs200 a night they sleep eight in a room with only a mat and pillow and a common toilet outside.

Colombo householders have to register all guests and residents with the police

under new Emergency regulations but few lodges keep guest registers. Tamils fleeing the North-East are supposed to apply for a special identity document but few will draw attention to themselves by going to the police.

They remain a natural target for roundups and reprisals. After Navy Commander Vice Admiral Clancy Fernando was assassinated in Colombo by a LTTE suicide bomber last November, over 3,000 young Tamils were arrested in night raids on lodges and student hostels. Colombo police believe there are already a number of "sleeper" LTTE suicide squads inside the capital waiting to be activated. Some 17 young Tamils were arrested in early February without identity papers. Police units regularly extort up to Rs30,000 in bribes to release suspects. The boys from the lodges, too poor to pay, stay in jail.

WESTERN GOVERNMENTS LOOK THE OTHER WAY AT UN HUMAN RIGHTS SESSIONS

Passport to impunity

WESTERN GOVERNMENTS will not challenge Sri Lanka's human rights record at the current UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) sessions in Geneva analysts say, because a range of cosmetic reforms made by the Colombo regime allows them to plan the repatriation of Tamils refused asylum in Europe.

Three new reports illustrate a rising tide of unease. Amnesty International's report *Sri Lanka: An Assessment of the Human Rights Situation* says disappearances and extra judicial killings continue particularly in the east and prisoners are tortured and ill-treated in police and military custody. Emergency regulations grant security forces widespread impunity and legal investigations remain intractable or outside public scrutiny through a range of ineffectual Presidential Commissions of Enquiry.

The report on a return visit to Sri Lanka last October by the UN Working Group on Disappearances to be tabled at the UNHRC sessions, highlights similar concerns saying violence and impunity have escalated inside the North-East war zone. Those most at risk of disappear-

ance says the report are young male Tamils in informal refugee camps such as schools or community halls.

In a ringing indictment of both combatants, the new report from the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) UTHR, *Rays of Hope Amidst Deepening Gloom*, catalogues the brutality of the Sri Lankan military's detention camps and "the Jaffna Gulag" - LTTE prison camps where over 4,000 are held in conditions "drawn from films and books about the Nazi and Stalinist prison complexes". The LTTE described the report as "a baseless lie".

The Sri Lankan government's response to international criticism has been to establish a Presidential Commission on Disappearances (CIRP) and a Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) to maintain a central register of over 10,000 detainees. Both are widely discredited by local NGOs as ineffectual and "an exercise in image building".

In an oral intervention at the UNHRC sessions, NGOs have urged continuing international scrutiny of Sri Lanka until its security forces are made accountable

and its human rights record substantially improves. Definitions of "improvement" are part of the problem. Disappearances in the south have dropped to less than ten a month since the end of the brutal insurrection by the Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) in which 40,000 people vanished between 1987 and 1990.

But the North-East war continues to fuel atrocities on both sides. Batticaloa's Peace Committee gave a visiting Danish delegation a list of 4,368 disappearances in the district since June 1990. Western governments strategically ignore the North-East while emphasising improvements in the south because they now want to send back Sri Lankan Tamils refused asylum in Europe to Colombo.

A joint report from embassies in Colombo now on ministers' desks in Europe says there has been a substantial improvement in the Sri Lankan human rights situation for Tamils since October 1991. Most human rights agencies say the situation has in fact deteriorated. Only peace and political settlement will overturn a State of Emergency that licences brutality and impunity.

Government gags independent newspapers

THE United National Party (UNP) government intends to gag independent newspapers in Sri Lanka says the new Free Media Movement (FMM) after tax officials raided the offices of three popular Colombo tabloids and five smaller opposition weeklies in early February, demanding immediate payment of power, water and telephone bills.

The offices of Sinhala tabloid *Lakdiva* with a 80,000 circulation were sealed to prevent the Sunday edition appearing said associate editor Vini Hettigoda who was arrested with five other journalists during a protest demonstration on 22 February. *Lakdiva* was singled out for non-payment of rent by municipal officials while other firms in the building complex were in greater arrears.

FMM, a coalition of Sri Lanka's leading journalists emerged last August after a series of physical attacks on journalists and government-inspired libel actions rendering embarrassing political disclosures by newspapers *sub judice*. Key business firms withdrew advertising from targeted newspapers after a denunciation by President Premadasa in late January. Opposition parties and journalists

launched a Democratic Movement for Media Freedom campaign at a rally in Colombo on 18 February chaired by Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leader Mrs S Bandaranaike. Sri Lankan television is completely dominated by President

Premadasa and UNP *tamashas* or "carnivals" with little space for opposing views or political comment.

In a thundering speech at Horana on 28 February, Mr Premadasa denounced critical newspapers as a conspiracy by "aristocrats in stately homes" in a reference to the old guard elite in both parties that his regime has sidelined. Four of the leading independent newspapers are published by the Wijewardene family related to the former UNP President JR Jayewardene. As one journalist described it, "the country's traditional establishment is not wholly in sympathy with the authoritarianism of the present government".

President Premadasa also claims that opposition politicians, newspapers and "foreign elements" are conspiring to revive the JVP - the southern Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front - whose violent insurrection cost 40,000 lives between 1987 and 1990. While the JVP threat has receded, almost 5,000 suspects remain in custody without trial. Another 3,000 have been rehabilitated and released. Six leading JVP cadre escaped from Pelawatte detention camp in late January.

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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