

130 refugees drown

OVER 130 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees fleeing to India died when an overcrowded trawler capsized at sea within a mile from Nachchikudah, 26 miles north of Mannar on 19 February. Reports say the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) launched a rescue operation and divers recovered the bodies of 94 people, many of them women and children displaced from Jaffna following military operations in December 1995. Twenty two people were saved. In October, 14 refugees died in a similar accident near Mannar Island.

Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) leader M Sivasithamparam has blamed the Sri Lankan government and says in a hard-hitting letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunge that harrowing tales of semi-starvation, disease and death in Vavuniya welfare centres where northern civilians fleeing the war zone are detained, have caused refugees to seek other avenues of flight.

The government blames the Tigers who it says are organising the refugee flight to draw India into the conflict. Despite the tragedy, over 100 other refugees reached Tamil Nadu in late February. Observers say shelling and aerial bombing in military operations are the main causes for the refugee flight.

As Colombo celebrated the 49th year of independence from Britain on 4 February, the Sri Lankan Army launched *Operation Edibala* (Gallant Force) on the Mannar-Vavuniya road, the third major military operation in the region since January 1991. While troops advanced west from Poovarankulam with artillery and air cover, another column moved north-west from Cheddikulam on the Medawachchiya-Mannar road. A third unit advanced on the Madhu-Periyathambanai road from Piramanankulam.

Within three days the Army brought Parayanankulam, 22 miles west of Vavuniya, under control and advanced further west to Madhu junction on 17 February. Four days later a jubilant mili-

tary announced that troops had linked up with Mannar Island relieving a 700 sq mile territory controlled by the Tigers for the last 15 years and cutting off a vital supply route between the Vanni and the Wilpattu jungles where the LTTE is believed to have set up major bases. The government has announced that the Mannar-Vavuniya and Medawachchiya-Mannar roads will be opened for traffic. Earlier, access to Mannar Island from the south was by boat through Kalpitty.

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Although *Operation Edibala* appears to be in response to LTTE attacks on Paranthan and Elephant Pass in January, observers believe that it followed Indian pressure as refugees continue to arrive in Tamil Nadu. Opposition parties say the government wanted to score a quick military victory before local elections on 21 March. They allege that the relatively sparsely populated Mannar area was chosen, because an operation northwards from Vavuniya would have been bloody and any political advantage gained neutralised by Army casualties.

The Army encountered only sporadic resistance in its long march to Mannar. But the Tigers attacked Vavuniya town on 7 February using long-range artillery captured in the Mullaitivu Army base assault in July 1996, killing two policemen. The military retaliated by shelling jungles and civilians in adjoining villages fled the areas.

Clashes in Nedunkerni in the Vanni in mid-February and the fear that a military operation north of Vavuniya was imminent, led to large-scale displacement of civilians. Vavuniya Government Agent

(GA) K Ganesh says over 14,700 people were displaced and 1,200-1,500 rushed into Vavuniya daily. There are already over 10,000 people in Vavuniya welfare centres. Another 6,000 displaced by *Operation Edibala* and military order that no one can stay within a mile on both sides of the Mannar-Vavuniya road also entered Vavuniya in February.

A further 15,000 dislodged in Parayanankulam, Kunchukulam and Kattaiadampan fled north seeking refuge in the Madhu area. Around 13,000 refugees have sought shelter in the camp near Madhu Church, the most-sacred Catholic shrine in Sri Lanka. The camp managed by international refugee agency UNHCR had already 6,000 refugees.

The massive displacement has created a logistical nightmare for government officers and relief agencies. Mannar GA SM Croos assisted by UNHCR rushed 40 lorryloads of food to Madhu. Medicines for 1997 have still not reached Mannar and an acute shortage of drugs is reported. The LTTE has accused the military of systematically destroying crops on 12,000 acres of fertile rice land around Giant's Tank creating a further shortage.

Of the 15,200 people who left Vavuniya since December 1996 to go to the north, over 13,500 remain under appalling and crowded conditions in camps in the eastern town of Trincomalee awaiting transport. Among them are some 4,000 awaiting clearance from intelligence agencies to travel north. Ships carry 440 passengers to the north every four days, but 300 people arrive from Vavuniya daily.

Observers say that a new refugee crisis is brewing as military operations continue and the 450,000 Jaffna refugees in LTTE-controlled Vanni realise that they may have to live in marginal conditions away from home for many years. Parents will make every effort to send their children away from the island as the LTTE and the Army hunt for Tamil youth for different reasons. As the Colombo door closes, parents may increasingly look to the Indian transit route to the West.

THE NORTH

Reconstruction

REPORTS say the Sri Lankan government will implement an emergency reconstruction plan in Jaffna through the Northern Province Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority (NPRRA) with the cooperation of a coordinating committee headed by EPDP leader Douglas Devananda. Assistance will be received from foreign governments and international agencies, including UNHCR. The plan includes improvement of water and electricity supply, transport, health facilities and schools. Germany is expected to provide Rs 180 million (\$3.6 million).

Rs 65 million (\$1.3 million) has been allocated for the Jaffna hospital where 25 of the 30 wards have already been refurbished. As the shortage of doctors and nurses is affecting the functioning of the hospital, reports say the government intends to recruit 100 doctors from India on two-year contracts.

Agriculture in Jaffna is resuming according to NPRRA. The ship *Maho* left Kankesanthurai for Colombo on 7 February carrying Rs 65 million worth produce including Jaffna red onions and tobacco. Despite the destruction of 2.5 million palmyrah trees in the north-east in the 13-year war, Rs 6.4 million worth palmyrah products were also despatched. As thousands of farm animals were killed in military operations, Jaffna Farmers Association has written to President Chandrika requesting help.

Observers say reconstruction may prove extremely difficult as the Tigers

infiltrate the peninsula with ease despite a massive security blanket. The LTTE attacked the Vetrilaikerni Army camp on the eastern coast of Jaffna on 2 February killing ten soldiers and injuring another four. Three Tigers were killed south of Palaly airbase on 13 February. Six days later five soldiers died in a landmine attack at Vaddukkottai.

As the government embarks on reconstruction of the Army-controlled peninsula, south across the lagoon in LTTE-controlled Vanni 450,000 Jaffna refugees suffer without adequate shelter, food and medicines. Mr Devananda told Health minister AHM Fowsie in late February that ten people were dying every day in the Akkarayan and Mallavi hospitals without essential drugs. Many bodies lie at the hospital without anyone to claim them because relatives have been displaced. Mullaitivu hospital suffers an acute shortage of medicines and authorities say the Out-Patients Department may have to be closed.

Food lorries northwards from Vavuniya were halted for eight days following *Operation Edibala* in early February bringing pressure on food stocks in the Vanni. In mid-February, private lorry owners refused to carry relief accusing the government Essential Services Commissioner of paying under-rates. Although 50 lorryloads of food are needed in the Vanni daily, only 50 lorries a week crossed the Thandikulam border checkpoint in February.

Asylum

A plane carrying 173 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers arrived at Schiphol airport in Amsterdam on 16 February from the Turkmenistan capital Ashkhabad. The group will remain in the country while asylum applications are processed.

Accused

A Presidential Commission of Enquiry says former President R Premadasa and National Security minister Ranjan Wijeratne were involved in the assassination of President Chandrika's husband Vijaya Kumaratunge in 1988.

Error

The Sri Lankan Airforce launched an attack on a Cuban ship named *Caribbean Queen* on 9 February off Mullaitivu suspecting it was carrying arms for the LTTE. The ship was searched but no weapons were found.

Disappearance

As the Disappearance Commission for the North-East continued its enquiries into 6,312 complaints, American Jesuit priest Fr Miller told the BBC on 27 February that he has recorded over 2,000 disappearances in Batticaloa.

Abuse

President Chandrika announced a new Child Protection Authority on 11 February. Swiss national Victor Bauman accused of child abuse was deported the following day. Another Swiss paedophile Heinrich Pfaffheuser sentenced to jail will also be deported.

Arrests in Tamil Nadu

POLICE in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu arrested five Tamils at the Alvarpettai suburb in Chennai (Madras) on 8 February alleging that they conspired to supply medicines to the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

Those taken into custody included MK Eelaventhana, Secretary of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Front (TELF) which broke away from the moderate TULF in 1982. Police say Tiger cadre Pandiyan who attempted to commit suicide was among the arrested.

AS Mani, editor of Tamil weekly journal *Netrikkan* was detained on 20 February accused of helping a Tiger member to acquire a mobile telephone. In late January Tamil Nadu Chief

Minister M Karunanidhi warned that support for the Tigers is treasonable and harsh action would be taken against those who speak in support of the LTTE at the Eelam Tamil Protection Conference organised in Chennai by Dr Ramdoss's Pattali Makkal Kadchi (PMK) on 1 February. Over 100,000 attended but observers say little was said about the plight of refugees.

There are currently 70,000 refugees in Tamil Nadu camps, including 8,000 new arrivals. Educational concessions for students have been restored but reports say arbitrary relocation of refugees is disrupting education.

India imposed a ban on the LTTE in May 1992 after the assassination of for-

mer Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The Jain Commission probing conspiracies behind the Rajiv murder is said to have made startling discoveries. Reports say deliberate attempts had been made by the Narasimha Rao Congress (I) government to suppress evidence to mislead the Commission. Crucial files were tampered with and vital files missing.

The Sri Lankan government is attempting to cement its relations with the state government in Tamil Nadu. A delegation led by Defence Secretary Chandrananda de Silva met Mr Karunanidhi on 20 February to discuss disputes over fishing in the Palk Strait and, analysts believe, the continued presence of the LTTE in Tamil Nadu.

■ Communal killings return to the east

Burned alive

ETHNIC violence erupted at Oddamavady in Batticaloa District after a Muslim Home Guard was shot dead on 9 February by alleged LTTE gunmen. Angry mobs burned two Tamils alive and hacked three others to death. Three Muslims were butchered in Karuvakerni. As panic spread Posts Deputy minister MLAM Hisbullah rushed to the scene to attempt reconciliation.

As Mr Hisbullah was arranging a peace conference, Oddamavady village was shelled on 10 February killing two Muslims and injuring seven others. The Muslim village came under shell attack again four days later wounding 12 people. UNP MP Alishahir Moulana says the shells were fired from Army-held areas.

The Mavadvembu Army camp was attacked at 1.30am on 2 February. Thirteen soldiers were killed and 12 others injured. Three civilians also died in the assault. Following the attack the Army shelled Chenkalady killing two civilians and wounding nine others.

Paithalai village resident T Parameswaran, 19, was killed by shells from the Valaichenai Paper Mills Corporation Army camp on 11 February. Two other civilians were injured in shelling at Pirainthuraichenai four days later. Ten more people were seriously wounded in a grenade attack on a Valaichenai market on 16 February.

Following a LTTE attack on a police office in Valaichenai town in early

February, the Army demolished parapet walls on the Valaichenai-Kalkudah main road and several other roads, using armoured vehicles. People were ordered to help remove all fences and cut down trees to deny cover for the LTTE. The military also carried out a house to house search in villages on 18 February. Over 200 people, including many from the Paithalai refugee camp were taken to the police station for interrogation.

Further south in Amparai District, the body of rice mill worker Subramaniam Ganeshan was handed over by the police to the Kalmunai hospital in early February. Tamil MP P Selvarajah has written to President Chandrika demanding an enquiry into his death. Another MP A Rasamanickam says seven Tamil youths were beaten up and injured when they went for their regular reporting at the Special Task Force Central Camp.

In Trincomalee District seven Tigers were killed in a clash at Sitraru on 2 February. On the same day the Army began a search operation in Trincomalee town. Large number of people were paraded before *Thalayattis* or masked informers and a few suspects detained.

Trinco residents say rents and other costs are rising sharply as more and more people arrive from Vavuniya. People complain that cost of travel by ship from Trincomalee to the north was increased four-fold to Rs 750 in February. A woman and three youths boarding the ship *Tharaki* on 18 February were arrested on suspicion of LTTE links.

constant fear

THE people of Jaffna live in constant fear caught in the grip of two warring armies and long for more peaceful days. As the Army continues search operations and arrests, a strong element of underground control by the Tigers in most areas persists. In the eight months since the 4 July LTTE suicide attack in Jaffna town, aimed at a government entourage, unleashed a backlash from the military, some observers allege that the Tigers have carried out at least 15 lamp post killings. Reports say Sivayogini who dared to receive cement from the military to repair her house was murdered. The Jaffna population remains isolated. The only telephone link to foreign countries at Vembadi junction in Jaffna town is under repair. With hundreds of checkpoints, freedom of movement is greatly restricted during the day and by 6pm streets are deserted. Tension and fear heighten at night and those in isolated areas move to relatives' houses as dusk settles. A

woman in Varani North said in February that soldiers entered her house at night smashing the door open and took away her husband blindfolded. The fate of over 700 people arrested by the Army remains unknown. The LTTE alleges that 21 year-old Rasiah Satheswaran was taken from the Navaly Pulavar refugee camp and beaten to death. In late February, five bodies of youths with gunshot wounds were brought in to the Jaffna hospital by the police who said they had been handed over to them by the Army, local sources told the *Sri Lanka Monitor*. One youth had his hands tied in front. In early February hundreds of parents and relatives demonstrated in front of the new EPDP office on Stanley Road in Jaffna town demanding information on those arrested and threatened to stage a hunger strike.

Protection denied

A new British Refugee Council report titled *Protection denied: Sri Lankan Tamils, the Home Office and the forgotten civil war*, launched in London on 17 February says human rights abuses have been carried out by both sides in the civil war and there is no longer a visible flight alternative for Tamils fleeing persecution in the north of Sri Lanka.

The report follows a Refugee Council mission to Sri Lanka led by Chief Executive Nick Hardwick in December 1996. The Sri Lankan government's attempts to promote human rights have been slow to change the institutional prejudices and practices which have resulted in continued pattern of abuse, particularly by security forces.

The report further says arbitrary

arrests, detention without trial and torture continue and it is unsafe to return asylum-seekers. The Refugee Council has pointed out that the high percentage of refusals of Sri Lankan asylum applications between 1994 and 1996 in Britain had resulted on Home Office's assessment of the situation in the island. The Home Office has been urged to modify its assessment in the light of the report findings. International refugee agency UNHCR has also been encouraged to review its position papers on Sri Lanka.

The Council has called on the British government to facilitate peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The only way to reduce asylum applications is to end the causes of flight - the war and human rights abuses.

Police file new charges to prolong detention Hill Country limbo

EIGHT Hill Country Tamil youths held in Kandy Bogambara prison say in a letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunge that they are in detention for several months without access to courts.

The youths, including father of five children Govindaraj Rajah of Ottery Estate in Dickoya allege that they had all been tortured and forced to sign confessions in the Sinhala language which they do not understand. They have not been informed of the reasons for the detention.

A large number of Plantation youth in custody are bitterly disappointed that Hill Country politicians holding high office in government and the trade unions have largely disregarded their plight. After a tour of the plantations, Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe says Hill Country youth are unable to travel outside their estates because of harassment in the name of security.

Arrests in the Hill Country and other areas of the south continue as police suspect LTTE infiltration. Moses Mary was

arrested in Ukkuressa, 8 miles north-west of Kandy in early February. Police say Ms Mary has coded writing on her body and used two passports under false names. Indian national Sadyan Nallarajah was taken into custody in Agalawatte, 15 miles south-east of Kalutara.

Batticaloa MP P Joseph raising a new concern with the Attorney General says the police are filing new charges against Tamil youths released by courts in order to detain them further. Currently a number of people remain in custody for over three years without trial.

Colombo Magazine prison detainee Nallathamby Balachandran says he was arrested in September 1991 in Valaichenai and severely tortured by the Batticaloa police Counter Subversive Unit, using gruesome methods including electric shocks. He was later forced to sign a confession in Sinhala and transferred to Magazine prison in August 1992. As he was about to be released following a court case in late 1994, three

new charges were filed against him in August, September and December 1994 on the basis of the confession extracted under torture in 1991.

Senior state counsel Sugatha Gamlath says over 300 cases have been filed in courts and a new court has been set up to expedite the cases, but concedes that prolonged detentions are a problem.

In Colombo arrests continue as police believe *Black Tiger* suicide bombers are hidden among the 150,000 Tamil refugees in the capital to attack high profile targets. Six people suspected of links with *Black Tiger* Rajaratnam Ketheeswary who committed suicide in Colombo in January, were arrested in early February. Two tailors alleged to be in possession of Tiger badges were arrested in Negombo on 4 February.

Meanwhile ten agents arrested in connection with the death of Sri Lankan refugees in Greece in December 1996 were allowed Rs 50,000 bail each by Colombo courts in mid-February.

MP assassinated

RATNAPURA Peoples' Alliance (PA) MP Nalanda Ellawala, 29, was assassinated at Kuruwita, 55 miles south-east of Colombo, on 11 February in the run up to local elections scheduled for 21 March. A bodyguard was also killed and five others were injured.

Warrants were issued for the arrest of Ratnapura United National Party (UNP) MP Susantha Punchinilame and former Mayor Mahinda Ratnatilleke who were present at the scene of the crime. Both were suspended from the UNP and later surrendered to the police. A case against Mr Punchinilame for the murder of three people in 1989 is still pending.

Despite a curfew, thousands of PA supporters let loose their fury in Ratnapura the following day, setting fire to shops and houses. Violence flared again after Mr Ellawala's funeral on 15 February. Two people were killed and over 100 wounded.

PA and UNP supporters have continued to clash for several months. In September last year five UNP members were shot dead in Negombo. By end of February local agency the Campaign Against Violence had recorded over 500

violent incidents. As further fighting was anticipated, a worried Parliament Speaker KB Ratnayake summoned an emergency meeting of political party leaders in late February, to discuss return

of weapons issued to politicians for their protection. Police say some 1,800 weapons still remain to be recovered.

Two local agencies the People's Alliance for Free and Fair Elections and the Movement for Free and Fair Elections are currently training some 5,000 election monitors. Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe has called for international monitoring, but reports say the government is unlikely to allow monitors from outside. Visas for representatives from the US-based National Democratic Institute have been denied.

The local elections would be a litmus test for the proposed referendum on the devolution proposals and there is a scramble for minority votes. In mid-March the Plantation party the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) announced that the government had agreed to give ownership of 200,000 estate line room houses to the occupant workers. Reports say ceremonial handing over of ownership title deeds have taken place in Nuwara Eliya. Certificates issued two years ago later proved to be worthless pieces of paper. People say this is another vote-grabbing exercise.

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.
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