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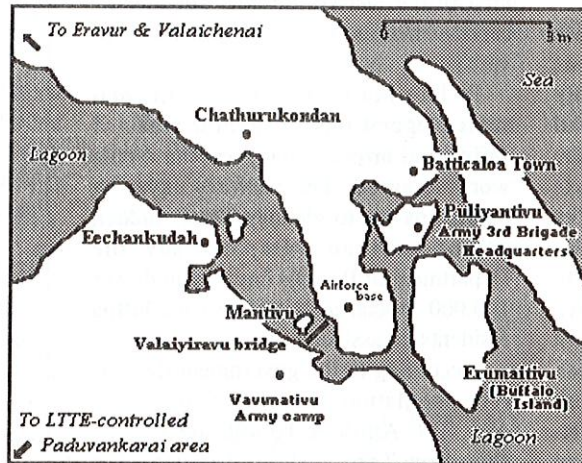
Tigers strike east

THE Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) challenged government control of the two key towns in eastern Sri Lanka mounting simultaneous assaults on the China Bay airbase in Trincomalee and Vavunativu Army camp in Batticaloa on 6 March. Reports say over 270 died on both sides.

Over 800 Tigers overran Vavunativu Army camp, after blasting Valaiyiravu bridge which links Batticaloa town to LTTE-controlled Paduvankarai area west of the lagoon. The Tigers shelled Army's Third Brigade headquarters in Batticaloa town, to prevent reinforcements, killing three and injuring 16 others. The LTTE set up long-range artillery guns captured from the Army, on nearby Erumaitivu (Buffalo Island). After removing a large quantity of weapons, the Tigers blasted the camp with explosives. Batticaloa Government Agent (GA) AK Pathmanathan says over 5,200 families are displaced following the offensive.

The same day, *Black Tiger* suicide squads breached heavy defences at China Bay airbase close to Trincomalee, 60 miles north, destroying a Chinese Y12 aircraft. The runway was damaged. The LTTE withdrew after Airforce helicopters from Anuradhapura airbase launched an attack. Observers say the attack on these heavily defended strategic military bases indicate the growing strength of the Tigers in the east and the inability of the military to respond mainly because of major troop withdrawals for northern operations.

The security forces responded with *Operation Thrivida Seraya* (Three forces power) in Mullaitivu on 13 March. While the Navy shelled coastal areas, the Airforce bombed the jungles. The military claims that LTTE leader V Prabhakaran's *One-Four Base* headquarters was destroyed. Hundreds of civilians including fishermen fled the coastal areas. Ten LTTE boats were destroyed by the Navy off Mullaitivu when the



Tigers attempted to intercept a naval convoy from Trincomalee on 24 March. The Navy says 100 *Sea Tigers* were killed.

Following the China Bay attack, the Petroleum Corporation suspended the use of the harbour jetty, forcing civilians to use small boats to join ships for Jaffna. Currently the only route to Jaffna for civilians is by ship from Trincomalee, although reports say the government may begin a shipping service from Mannar.

Over 12,000 people remain in Trincomalee due to return to Jaffna from the 57,000 civilians who have crossed the Vavuniya checkpoint fleeing Tiger control since last October. Most of them want to move south to Colombo to escape the war or get money from relatives abroad. Relief workers estimate fewer than 4,000 have been cleared to travel to the capital while the Tiger suicide bomber threat continues. Faced with the alternative of limbo in insanitary camps in Vavuniya many people reluctantly agree to return to Jaffna.

Around 600 people arrive from Vavuniya daily but only 1,200 are able to leave for Jaffna weekly. Trincomalee Regional Secretary V Velum Mayilum says security clearance for only 5,000 of the 12,000 has been received from intelligence agencies. Private residences and lodges are full and some refugees are now accommodated in local government offices where facilities are minimal. Observers say a high level conference in

Colombo on 2 April concentrated more on expediting travel to Jaffna rather than facilities for the thousands held up.

Travel from Vavuniya to Trincomalee has become a nightmare. Reports say only two carriages in the Vavuniya-Colombo *Rajarata Rajini* train have been allocated for refugees and 125 people are packed into each carriage which can accommodate only 88. The carriages have no water or other facilities and the train has been dubbed by the Colombo press as the "torture

train". A bus carrying refugees crashed in early March at Horowupotana, 30 miles south-east of Vavuniya. Twenty nine people were seriously injured and Point Pedro resident Annamalai Manickam, 87, died in hospital.

The misery of the refugees continues after they arrive in Trincomalee. They have to live in crowded and appalling conditions. UNP MP Jayalath Jayawardena who visited Trincomalee says camp conditions are sub-human and refugees lack basic facilities. Human rights activists say the two camps allocated for those arriving from Vavuniya are overflowing and fear the spread of disease. There were over 2,600 in the Glass Factory and the Sangamitha Tourist Home refugee camps in late March.

In mid-March security officers rejected the Uppuveli Technical College building for use as an additional camp. Local government officers have been instructed to find a secure building to prevent people escaping. The Northern Province Rehabilitation and Resettlement Authority (NPRRA) has appointed a team of seven members to expedite return of the displaced Jaffna people.

Meanwhile the Army arrested four men and a woman at the refugee camp at 4th Mile Post on 11 March. They were released two days later. The 1,770 refugees in this camp were returned from refugee camps in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu between 1992 and 1996.

THE NORTH

Disappearing Jaffna

KILLINGS and disappearances in the Jaffna peninsula are creating deep concern among human rights agencies. The Colombo-based Centre for Human Dignity says it has recorded 676 disappearances in Jaffna in 1996. The figure, the centre says includes 271 government officers and 26 students. Twenty two of the disappeared were between the ages of 41 and 61.

Reports from Jaffna say as clashes continue, arrest and detention of at least ten youths a day are taking place mainly in Jaffna town, Kokuvil, Manipai and Chavakachcheri areas. Relatives say the Army denies arrests and no action is being taken despite President Chandrika Kumaratunge's assurance that disappearances will be investigated. According to a report by the Government Agent (GA), only 31 out of the 676 people have been traced in Army custody.

In a habeas corpus application Selvaratnam Saraswathy says the whereabouts of her 22 year-old son Arunthavarajah arrested by the Army on 17 June at Kondavil is unknown. Manjula Thurairajah, 23, taken into Army custody from her home in Kondavil in late February has since disappeared. The Army shot dead traders Krishnan Perampalam and Nagamuthu Rajendran on 1 March at Sangarathai in Vaddukottai.

In a March 1997 report titled *Conflict and Displacement in Sri Lanka*, the US Committee for Refugees says the Sri

Lankan military should put an end to disappearances and follow established procedures on arrest and detention. According to the US Committee, the LTTE has carried out a number of "lamp-post killings" to discourage people cooperating with the authorities. Other sources say the Tigers have "executed" over 15 people in the Point Pedro area in the last six months but fear of reprisal makes the killings difficult to verify.

In late March the Army launched search operations in several areas of Jaffna and arrested many youths. Some were detained. The military says the operations are to identify Tigers hidden among civilians. Reports say the Department of Persons has prepared over 140,000 special identity cards for Jaffna residents, to assist the Army.

According to the government the current population of Jaffna peninsula is 426,500. Another 10,400 arrived by ships from Trincomalee in February. The Army says a further 2,000 people crossed the Jaffna lagoon in boats from the mainland into the peninsula. Press reports say the GA has sought permission to settle 56,800 people in the western Valikamam north area which remains a security zone.

Sufficient food is currently available in Jaffna. However, observers say, after the destruction of most industries and few avenues of employment the purchasing power of the people remains low.

Offer

Following a mediation offer by PLO leader Yasser Arafat on a brief visit to Sri Lanka on 24 March, Batticaloa Tiger political leader *Shanker* said that third party mediation was imperative. Sources say Tiger International Representative Lawrence Thilagar travelled to Mullaitivu to brief LTTE leader V Prabhakaran on the concerns of the international community.

Commission

A new five-member Human Rights Commission headed by former Supreme Court judge OSM Seneviratne was appointed by the government on 17 March. The Commission will monitor and investigate human rights abuses and has power of penal sanction.

Failure

London-based agency Article 19, the International Centre against Censorship says in a March report titled *Reform at risk? Continuing censorship in Sri Lanka*, that the People's Alliance (PA) government has not only failed to implement many reforms promised, but also has acted in a manner which threatened freedom of expression.

Released

Justice minister GL Peiris released 18 Chapters of the proposed new constitution on 26 March including changes by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Constitutional Reform. The chapter on devolution is yet to be made public.

150 die in refugee camps

REPORTS say 150 people died of disease in January and February in 16 refugee camps in the Pooneryn area of Vanni. Around 16,000 refugees from Jaffna live in these camps. Diseases are spreading rapidly as basic water and sanitary problems have not been solved.

Over 400,000 Jaffna refugees face deteriorating conditions in LTTE-controlled Vanni. The government claims there are only 190,000 refugees and a committee appointed by Presidential Secretary K Balapatabendi to report on the refugees has not disclosed its findings after four months.

Dry rations for Vanni refugees were suspended from 1 January following a decision to end relief to areas where gov-

ernment's poverty alleviation *Samurthi* programme was implemented. After the north-east Government Agents (GA) brought to the notice of the President that *Samurthi* was not being implemented in most of their areas, dry rations were resumed on 23 March.

Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu Government Agents (GAs) say many schools are damaged and are full of refugees. Of the 91,000 students in the two districts 41,000 are displaced from Jaffna and over 1,000 teachers are urgently needed.

In Vavuniya, 14,000 refugees from LTTE areas continue to suffer in 11 welfare centres under pathetic conditions. Vavuniya GA K Ganesh says some

restrictions have been relaxed. Those over 60 years of age will be released to relatives or a permanent resident of Vavuniya. Some 5,000 others returned from Tamil Nadu are in Asikulam and Cheddikulam camps managed by international refugee agency UNHCR.

Reports say the LTTE has accused the UNHCR of failing to press the Sri Lankan government to ease the restrictions of food and other commodities. The US Committee for Refugees in its report has urged the LTTE to assume greater responsibility for the needs of refugees under its control. The Committee says the LTTE is critical of the government's relief record, but yet it manipulates government provided food.

■ Teachers forced to screen students in Batticaloa

Refugees killed in reprisal firings

AFTER a LTTE attack on the Valaichenai police station in Batticaloa District on 4 March, the police fired on Peithalai refugee camp injuring six people including three children.

The civilian population, both in Army-held and Tiger-controlled areas are under tremendous pressure as attacks and retaliation continue in the east. A Ranjithapoosanam, 54, was injured by a shell on 6 March in Valaichenai. Vimaladevi and Arunthavam of Kannankudah were seriously wounded by a shell two days later. Another shell fired from the Kinnaiyady Army camp killed a mother and daughter at Murukantivu, north of Kiran on 9 March.

S Jeevaratnam was shot and injured

by the Army while fishing in the lagoon at Peithalai on 30 March. Following a LTTE landmine attack in Eravur on 1 April in which a police officer died, Army shells killed Pathmanathan Sanjeevan, 4, and Thambapillai Jeyadevi.

Batticaloa MP P Joseph says a widow and her sister were raped by soldiers at Mylambaveli, four miles north of Batticaloa town. The four soldiers were not identified in an identification parade on 26 March, and have been allowed bail by a magistrate.

The Army is forcibly using local students and teachers to prevent LTTE infiltration into Batticaloa town. A teacher and two students each from five prominent schools must be present at the

Koddaimunai bridge linking the northern and southern parts of the town, between 7.30am and 8.15am to identify fellow teachers and students. Parents and teachers say the procedure may endanger the lives of students and teachers.

Following the LTTE destruction of the Valaiyiravu bridge on 6 March, 24 schools in the Vavunativu area remain closed as many teachers and students are unable to attend. People in Vavunativu area who earn their living by selling milk, firewood and vegetables in Batticaloa town are unable to carry on their trade. Supply of dry rations to displaced people has also been affected.

After the LTTE Vavunativu attack the Army has denied permission for farmers to harvest their *Maha* rice crop west of the lagoon and the Valaiyiravu bridge remains closed. Observers say food shortages in the area may become worse.

Army-imposed restriction of food and medicines to LTTE-controlled Vaharai area further north continues. Reports say the LTTE has strengthened its own administration in Vaharai and Paduvankarai. All activities are Tiger-controlled and taxes have been imposed.

The Army says LTTE's former Batticaloa political leader *Babu* and a local commander were killed in an ambush at Vavunativu on 7 March. Further south in Yala Wildlife Sanctuary a tourist jeep was hijacked on 4 March by suspected Tigers. Reports say a Sinhalese spy working for the LTTE was arrested in the jungle two days later.

prime suspects

MYSTERIOUS murders in the Army-controlled Vavuniya and Batticaloa towns suggest that death squads are again becoming active. The bodies of two women - Kumarasamy Sujitha, 24, of Neerveli in Jaffna and Meganathan Jayasutha, 22, of Rambaikulam - were found near Vavuniya market on 12 March. Both had been shot dead. According to reports Sujitha had obtained a pass at the Thandikulam checkpoint police station. Earlier in the month the bodies of two men were found in the town. Tamil group PLOTE's Vavuniya MP Shanmuganathan says all parties must unite to prevent murders in an area where thousands of troops are stationed. Sources say the security forces and the Tamil group PLOTE are prime suspects in a number of murders in Vavuniya which remain uninvestigated.

Earlier in the month, mother of five children Murugiah Kanmani, 38, was killed

by a gunshot while she slept at home in Samayapuram. Her family had been displaced from Punnalaikadduvan in Jaffna. In Batticaloa, Thavarajah Anthonyrajah, 25, who went to church on the morning of 7 March was later found dead with gunshot wounds. Mervin Thikas, 54, killed by gunmen in mid-March at her home in Iruthayapuram. Tamil MP Joseph Pararajasingham says that according to local people a gang in police uniform was responsible for the killing. The bodies of Seenithamby Koneswaran, 28, and Muthiah Arul, 23, arrested by men in Army uniform on 12 March at Thalavai in Eravur were recovered ten days later at Palacholai. Sivanesarajah Amaladas, 19, was found dead on Notaries Road in Batticaloa town on 17 March. Former LTTE cadre Amaladas had surrendered earlier to the security forces. He had been shot in the head.

Securing Mannar

THE Army ran amok in Pesalai on Mannar Island after the LTTE shot dead a soldier during a search operation on 24 March. Many shops were damaged and contents smashed. Civilians were attacked and a house was set ablaze.

Five days earlier, the police fired indiscriminately in Mannar town during the night damaging many houses and shops. Several people were injured and a resident of Kaddukaran Kudiyiruppu was killed. PLOTE leader D Sitharthan whose office was also damaged has demanded an inquiry.

People say the lull following the opening of a land route to the south from Mannar after Army operation *Edibala* in February has been shattered. The Army searched Mannar town on 21 March to

track down Tiger infiltrators. Over 1,000 people were taken to the police station, questioned and later released.

After *Edibala*, 10 to 15 lorries arrive daily in Mannar carrying food and prices have fallen. Reports say that the 4,000 fishing families are relieved now that fish can be sent to southern markets. But farmers who fled to LTTE-controlled Madhu area are angry over the military's refusal to allow them to return to their fields to harvest 15,000 acres of rice. Further south in Puttalam District, security forces conducted a search in Manaltivu Tamil village on 5 March and detained 20 people. Over 1,200 people in Udappu were interrogated on 29 March and another 20 taken into custody. Police say they are from the north.

De facto impunity for security forces

Death squad trial abandoned

THE case relating to the 1995 murder in custody of 21 Tamils, whose bodies were found in Bolgoda and other lakes around Colombo, was struck off the court roll by Colombo Chief Magistrate Munidasa Nanayakkara on 13 March as neither the accused nor the Attorney General's representative were present. The 22 Special Task Force (STF) members arrested in connection with the killings in September 1995 and released on bail three months later had allegedly returned to active duty. Those killed included Naresh Rajadurai, a video shop owner in Colombo's Wellawatte suburb.

The Magistrate said that the absence of the Attorney General's Department was an obstruction of justice. Human rights agencies say the manifest reluctance on the part of the state's law enforcement authorities in such an important case encourages impunity.

Over 300 Tamils were arrested in Colombo on 2 April in search operations. Police say they had all arrived in the city

recently from the north-east. The government suspects many *Black Tiger* suicide members are hidden among the 150,000 Tamil refugees in Colombo.

Tamil MP Joseph Pararajasingham says 1,700 Tamil youths are currently in detention suspected of LTTE links. Eighty eight youths arrested in May 1996 in Jaffna were recently found to be held at the Youth Rehabilitation Centre in Wiravila in Hambantota District, 85 miles south of Colombo. The youths say in a letter to Mr Pararajasingham that they were assaulted after arrest and forced to sign confessions in the Sinhala language. None of them has been produced before a court.

Eighty nine others also arrested in Jaffna and sent to Colombo in December 1996 are expected to be produced before the Anuradhapura courts in early April. In late March, a Colombo magistrate ordered the release of Mariyanayagi Peter arrested on 24 February and detained. She had come to Colombo from

the north to join her husband abroad.

Addressing the 53rd Session of the UN Human Rights Commission in March, Tamil Congress leader Kumar Ponnambalam said there was total disregard of the principles relating to arrest and detention in Sri Lanka and Tamils were tortured and confessions manufactured. There has been a startling increase in gang-rape, involuntary disappearances in the north-east and in Colombo and in cases of extra-judicial executions. Mr Ponnambalam was detained briefly at the Colombo airport on his way to the UN Sessions in Geneva and documents on torture removed from him.

In his speech Sri Lanka's ambassador to the UN, AB Goonetilleke emphasized his country's commitment to human rights and in a reference to the LTTE, warned the Commission to be circumspect of organisations ostensibly promoting minority rights while acting as agents of groups threatening the integrity of sovereign states.

PA wins local elections

THE ruling People's Alliance (PA) scored a victory at the local government elections in 17 southern districts, on 21 March, winning 194 of 238 local bodies, including seven of the 12 municipal councils. The PA polled 49% of the votes while the main opposition United National Party (UNP) won 41% gaining control of 43 councils.

Although making a substantial gain from 38 councils before the elections, the PA lost the prestigious Colombo Municipal Council despite the support of former UNP Mayor K Ganeshalingam. Over 18,500 candidates contested for 3,567 seats in the councils. Nearly 77% of the 9.7 million registered voters turned out to vote in an election marred by unprecedented violence and intimidation.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe claims vote-rigging took place on a massive scale. Two election monitors, the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) and the Movement for Free and Fair Elections (MFFE) say that in many areas voting was relatively free and fair, but concede that violence would have affected results in several local authorities.

According to the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence, over 1,800 violent incidents, including eight murders, took place in the run-up to and during elections. Police were unsuccessful

in withdrawing all weapons supplied for protection and reports say politicians wielded guns on polling day to keep opponents away. PAFFREL says there was flagrant violation of election laws and the PA used state resources.

Although ministers say the victory signals people's acceptance of the government peace proposals, there is concern in government ranks by the fall in votes for PA from a high 62% in the presidential election in November 1994. The disastrous performance of PA ally the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) in the Hill Country has unsettled the government.

But the PA draws consolation from the rejection of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) which gained only 1% of the votes. The MEP has been a prominent campaigner against the government devolution proposals. The government may proceed with caution despite a cooperation agreement in March with the UNP on the ethnic issue brokered by the British government. Observers say the government is likely to opt for a general election and postpone the referendum until November.

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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