

## Battle for the Vanni

OVER 50,000 people in the Vanni fled seeking safety as the Sri Lankan Army launched *Operation Jayasikurui* (Certain Victory) on 13 May using 20,000 troops, to open a land supply route from Vavuniya to Jaffna through territory controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

While troops advanced from Nochchimodai, the last outpost from the border town of Vavuniya, along the main Jaffna road towards Omanthai, four miles away, a second column moving north-west from the Kent-Dollar Farm military base at Veli Oya in Mullaitivu District captured Nedunkerni after eight days of intense fighting.

Troop advances were preceded by shelling of Nedunkerni and Oddusuddan areas causing extensive damage to property. At least 19 civilians are reported killed including three children in Airforce bombing at Nedunkerni on 14 May. A third Army column marching north from Poovarasankulam, came under heavy attack at Kuruvikulam. The capture of Omanthai was designed to put Vavuniya beyond LTTE's new artillery capability, military analysts say.

The Army's advancing columns plan to link up at Puliyanikulam, the junction town where the Jaffna road branches to Nedunkerni and the Tiger heartland of Mullaitivu. The capture of the Vavuniya-Jaffna and the Nedunkerni-Puliyanikulam roads will isolate Mullaitivu and reduce LTTE control over the population denying manpower resources for recruitment.

In an attempt to divert attention as *Jayasikurui* was about to begin, LTTE's *Charles Anthony Brigade* mounted an assault on the Morawewa police station on the Trincomalee-Anuradhapura border killing 15 policemen and injuring another 25. After an interval to observe the Buddhist Vesak festival on 21 May, the Army resumed *Operation Jayasikurui* three days later. Amidst heavy LTTE attacks destroying tanks and armoured vehicles, troops secured Rambaikulam, a mile north of Omanthai, on 24 May.

*Nineteen refugees trying to escape the fighting drowned when their boat capsized off Jaffna on 28 May. Over 160 refugees have died in the Palk Strait since October.*

The Tigers put up stiff resistance as troops from Veli Oya moved closer to Mullaitivu where LTTE leader V Prabhakaran's *One-Four Base* lies deep in thick jungles. LTTE's artillery guns, captured in the Mullaitivu Army camp attack in July last year, and mortar fire caused large number of casualties in the Army on both fronts. Colombo newspapers say 130 soldiers died and 650 injured. Other sources put the casualty figures at 1,000. According to the government 214 Tigers were killed and over 600 wounded. The LTTE admits to only 72 killed.

Villages between Omanthai and Nedunkerni are deserted. People have fled north-east to Mullaitivu and Puthukudiyiruppu or north-west to Thunukkai and Mantai. Others have gone to the western coastal town of Nachchikudah to take a boat to Jaffna or to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Nineteen refugees trying to escape the fighting drowned when their boat capsized off Jaffna on 28 May. Over 160 refugees have died in the Palk Strait since October.

Over 3,000 refugees trekked across the jungle to Uyilankulam in Mannar District through the Madhu area. Reports say that only those displaced in December 1995 from Jaffna are being

allowed into Uyilankulam by the Army and permanent Vanni residents are being turned back. Around 1,200 people have been sent to the UNHCR camp in Pesalai and Mannar Government Agent (GA) SM Croos says Jaffna refugees will be transported by ship to the peninsula.

As fighting began and transport across Thandikulam to the Vanni was suspended, NGOs expressed fears of new food and medical shortages in the region. Medicines for the second quarter of 1997 have still not reached the Vanni. As international NGOs met in Colombo to discuss the emerging humanitarian crisis in mid-May, Kilinochchi GA S Thillainadarajah dispatched urgent messages to Colombo bureaucrats asking for 450 lorry-loads of rice and wheat flour.

Mullaitivu GA R Tharmakulasingham who also demanded urgent supply of food says many people in the district are suffering from diseases without adequate medicines. The Army at Madhu refused to permit Mr Thillainadarajah to travel to Colombo to explain the plight of the civilians to the government. On 31 May, 80 food lorries were permitted on a circuitous route through Madhu to Periyamadhu with ICRC escort.

After the loss of Jaffna, the Tigers place great importance on the Vanni, where their command and control centres, fuel and arms stores and underground hospitals lie. Vital LTTE supply routes linking the north and the east run through the Vanni. Speaking to the BBC on 13 May former Airforce chief Harry Goonetilleke said that *Operation Certain Victory* was inevitable as government supplies to Jaffna by air and sea were proving highly expensive.

By the end of May Sri Lankan troops had not reached Puliyanikulam. Some observers say the government's intention is to go for a general election riding a wave of popularity after *Operation Certain Victory* to enhance its current wafer-thin majority in Parliament and to push through the devolution package. Analysts have little doubt that the battle for the Vanni will be bloody.



JAFNA

# Casualties of peace

TAMIL MP A Thangathurai told Parliament in early May that disappearances in Jaffna are continuing and called for urgent government action to end growing fear and uncertainty among the peninsula's population.

The fate of 656 people disappeared in Jaffna last year remains unknown. The *Jaffna Organisation of the Parents of the Disappeared* says in a petition to President Chandrika Kumaratunge in late May that there are witnesses to the arrests of the disappeared by the Army. Over 500 members of the organisation demonstrated before the Jaffna government secretariat on 12 May.

In mid-May a committee appointed by the Defence Ministry recorded evidence relating to 16 disappearances in Atchuvely. But people have little confidence in the enquiry and say the investigations should be by an independent committee headed by a judge. A *habeas corpus* application before the Court of Appeal in May says Jaffna University student Sinniah Somaskanthan arrested in the peninsula on 12 August last year, has disappeared.

Continuing allegations of torture in custody in Jaffna alarm human rights agencies. Fisherman Thangavel Gunavel, 21, says in a fundamental rights application to the Supreme Court that he was held at Anaikottai Army camp for 50 days and brutally tortured. His fingers were bandaged and set alight after pouring petrol over them. He alleges that

blood was removed from his body on several occasions.

Jaffna remains tense. Security forces handed over the bodies of three youths to the Jaffna hospital on 11 May. One of them is said to have committed suicide by taking cyanide, a Tiger hallmark, and another had been shot dead by the Army at Sandilipai.

LTTE infiltration, even in the heavily defended Jaffna town, continues. The Army suspects that many Tiger cadre are hidden among civilians. Four soldiers travelling in a tractor were killed in a landmine attack on 16 May at Chunnakam. A 80 year-old man also died in the explosion. Following the incident, soldiers fired indiscriminately injuring 11 civilians. In another LTTE landmine attack at Manipay on 29 May two civilians were killed.

Senior government officer in Jaffna the Government Agent (GA) says in a report to the Defence Ministry that only 44% of the Jaffna population of 974,000 is currently in the peninsula. Of the 250,000 who have returned to home areas from Vadamarchy, Thenmarachy and the Vanni, 76% have been resettled. Others continue to remain in refugee camps.

Food distribution continues to remain a problem in the peninsula. A new Jaffna University research indicates that 50% of the children are malnourished because nutritious food is not reaching the population in sufficient quantities.

## Released

Eighty three Tamil youths arrested in Jaffna last year and detained in Colombo and Anuradhapura prisons were released on bail by court on 9 May. Bail was fixed at Rs 2,500 for 64 youths and Rs 25,000 for the others.

## Refusal

The Sri Lankan government is considering changes in police laws after many policemen refused transfers to the northern war zone. Over 200 policemen left their posts in mid-May at Parayanalankulam in Mannar.

## Sacked

Douglas Devananda's Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) sacked two of its MPs R Rameswaran and R Ramamurthy in May. Mr Devananda says disciplinary action was taken against them following complaints of impropriety from Jaffna residents.

## Sunk

Seven *Sea Tiger* boats were sunk and 40 Tigers killed in an encounter with the Sri Lankan Navy off Kokkilai in Mullaitivu District on 27 May. The Navy says the LTTE cadre were on their way to the Vanni battle front.

## Summit

The 9th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the Maldives on 12 May decided that a South Asian Free Trade Association (SAFTA) will be established by the year 2001.

# Protest rekindles war of words

OVER 2,000 fishermen demonstrated in the coastal Nagapatnam town in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on 21 May against attacks by the Sri Lankan Navy in the Palk Strait dividing the two countries. The Navy shot dead two Indian fishermen off Jagathampatnam in Pudukkottai District on 10 May and arrested three others. The Indian National Fishermen's Union says five other fishermen who went to sea on the same day are missing.

Immediately after the shooting Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi called on Indian Prime Minister IK Gujral to intervene. Eight Indian fishermen are currently under custody in Jaffna accused of entering Sri Lankan

territorial waters. The plight of fishermen is a sore point in Indo-Sri Lanka relations. In early May Indian coastguard arrested five Sri Lankan fishermen.

The Sri Lankan Navy says *Sea Tiger* boats among Indian fishing craft are launching attacks on naval vessels. Other reports say the LTTE continues to smuggle arms and fuel across the Palk Strait. The Indian Navy arrested four people said to be Tiger agents with 2,500 litres of petrol in a boat on 18 May. Earlier in the month, police arrested four youths who attempted to extort Rs 200,000 from a Sri Lankan refugee family at Mylapur.

The Rajiv Gandhi murder case in which LTTE leader V Prabhakaran is the main accused is expected to be complet-

ed by August. According to press reports the Jain Commission enquiring into conspiracies behind the killing has sent a questions list to Rajiv Gandhi's wife Sonia Gandhi, including queries on the links between the LTTE and the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad.

Giving evidence before the Commission former Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao denied allegations that his government blocked investigations into the Rajiv murder and claimed Mr Karunanidhi's DMK government passed on state secrets to the LTTE in 1989. In a statement issued in late May the Tamil Nadu government says it remains vigilant and LTTE activities have been curtailed in the state.



## ■ Rape, murder and terror in the East

# War crimes

PRESIDENT Chandrika Kumaratunge has ordered an investigation into the rape and murder of Amparai Central Camp area resident Murugesapillai Koneswary, 35, a mother of four children.

Policemen are accused of killing her after gang rape, by exploding a grenade inserted into her vagina. The brutal manner of the murder has shocked residents and human rights workers say rape is increasingly used to terrorise the population. Colombo NGO Women and Media Collective says at least seven rapes by security forces have been reported in the east since 31 December. TULF leader M Sivasithamparam says the police Special Task Force (STF) abducted four women from Sammanthurai and murdered one of

them in late May. Fear has been expressed over Army search operations in the nights. People say some security force personnel wear masks during night searches to avoid identification.

Following the death of two policemen in a grenade attack on 9 May at Kalmadhu, north of Batticaloa, four civilians were killed in a clash between the LTTE and the Army. Three days later T Sivaparamarajah who went fishing in Pudukunavai, south of Batticaloa, was found dead with gun shot wounds. Shelling from Kumburumoolai Army camp on 14 May killed M Valliammai, 60, and injured four others.

The Army launched an unprovoked attack on people on the main

Valaichenai-Batticaloa road at Kiran on 18 May. A man was seriously injured. After Tamil group TELO member and Eravur local councillor Subramaniam Thurairajah was shot dead by LTTE gunmen on 23 May, the Army shelled villages killing three civilians and injuring 12 others.

Timber trader Sinnathamby Anantharajah was shot dead at night on 21 May at Karuvakerni. In the past LTTE's pistol group has shot dead a number of people belonging to other militant groups and civilians regarded as traitors. Murders have also been attributed to former members of PLOTE and EPRLF involved with the Sri Lankan intelligence services.

Batticaloa political leader S Geethan told a team of Colombo journalists in late May at Pattipalai that LTTE administration was now well established and after the introduction of the Tiger police force, the crime rate has fallen. The Tigers are accused of stealing 39 fishing boats in Valaichenai and Kalkudah in mid-May and demanding ransom.

In Trincomalee District, two women said to have possessed explosives were arrested at Pallikudiyiruppu near Muthur on 20 May. The LTTE blasted two electricity towers on 25 May plunging the town into darkness.

A Greek ship named *Athena* carrying 50,000 tonnes of wheat flour from Argentina was damaged by a bomb on 29 May, six miles off Trincomalee harbour. The government has accused the Tigers

# Bill blocked

THE Supreme Court ruling on 7 May that the new Broadcasting Bill is totally inconsistent with the Sri Lankan Constitution is a severe embarrassment to the government. The Bill envisaged that the Media minister would appoint all members of the proposed Broadcasting Authority. The minister would also be vested with the power of directing the Authority. In the case filed by the Free Media Movement, the Supreme Court panel headed by the Chief Justice GPS de Silva found that the Authority lacked the independence required to regulate the electronic media and criticised the unjustified discrimination in favour of the government-controlled media. The Court declared the Bill placed the freedoms of speech and thought in jeopardy.

Despite the ruling, the Bill can be approved by Parliament by a two-thirds majority under incongruous constitutional provisions which allow laws contrary to the Constitution to exist. But with a slender parliamentary majority the government was forced to withdraw the Bill. Human rights agencies are appalled by government attempts to gag the media brazenly flouting promises that freedom of expression will be guaranteed.

London-based agency Article 19 earlier this year condemned the government for not only failing to implement many reforms promised as part of its election campaign but also acting increasingly in a manner which directly threatens free expression. Reports say the Cultural Affairs Ministry is proposing to set up bodies to control arts, literature and culture with powers similar to that of the Broadcasting Authority.

# Food aid manoeuvres

MANNAR Government Agent (GA) MS Croos says that the Army order for people in LTTE-controlled areas in the district to come to military-held Madhu road junction to receive food aid has not worked. According to the GA, 78,000 of the 124,000 people in Mannar District are currently in LTTE areas.

Since 6 May seven lorryloads of food awaited at Madhu junction, but no one turned up to claim the dry rations. Reports say fear and the long travelling distance, in some cases 40 miles, is putting off the refugees. A policeman was killed and 16 others injured in a bomb explosion at nearby Parayanalankulam on 8 May.

According to Mr Croos, changes have been made in the procedure for issue of

passes to travel outside. Currently, everyone must complete seven forms and obtain approval from the Village headman, the GA, the police and the Army. From mid-May people may travel to Vavuniya after registering at the Mannar Civil Coordinator's office. Those travelling to Colombo must obtain recommendations from the Village headman, the AGA and the Civil Coordinator.

Further east in Vavuniya town, over 1,400 people from the Vanni were stranded following *Operation Jayasikurui*. There are another 12,000 people in refugee camps. In mid-May Tamil group PLOTE demanded the closure of all refugee camps and schools in Vavuniya fearing that they may come under LTTE artillery attack.



# Mass arrests and torture claims in Colombo

## *Black Tiger alert*

COLOMBO went on red alert in mid-May after reports that a 12-member *Black Tiger* suicide squad had entered the capital to assassinate a key member of the ruling People's Alliance (PA). The police published photographs of five Tamil women alleged to be *Black Tigers* and sought information from the public.

The police and the Army jointly checked Tamil areas and lodges as large-scale search operations began in mid-May in the city. Over 400 LTTE suspects were taken into custody. The government, fearing that the Tigers may launch bomb attacks in Colombo as troops advance in *Operation Jayasikurui* in the Vanni, drafted more policemen from other provinces. The police arrested over 100 beggars following intelligence reports that *Black Tigers* were disguised as down-and-outs.

At least 10% of those arrested are detained for further enquiries. In late May the Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) recorded over 810 Tamil deten-

tions in Colombo and Kalutara prisons and at the police headquarters. Colombo human rights agency the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) says that cordon and search, random arrests and house-to-house searches take place almost every day. According to MIRJE many more Tamils are currently held in police stations.

Vadivel Vethanayagam who refused to give his lorry to a police inspector was arrested in December and is held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Mr Vethanayagam says he was tortured and his three year-old daughter was also detained at the Crime Detection Bureau for two months.

Velsamy Vigneswaran, held in Colombo Magazine prison alleges in a fundamental rights application to the Supreme Court that he was arrested on 7 February and brutally tortured. Student Thiraviyam Sutharshan, 22, arrested on 25 January in a refugee camp in Vavuniya alleges he was hung by his legs

and beaten by the Army. Over 70 people were arrested in the Hill Country town of Kandy in a search operation on 20 May. Police say many of them were unable to produce their national identity cards and proof of police registration. Under current Emergency regulations all residents must register with the police. MIRJE says only Tamils are checked for registration.

Hill Country resident Palaniyandy Kanagasivam's wife Mallika says in a fundamental rights application that her husband, arrested on 9 January, was sent illegally to a rehabilitation centre when he refused to sign a prepared confession. She also says that her daughter Thamilmvani is detained at the Kandy police station since January and forced to sign a confession under threat of torture.

A protest fast by Tamil prisoners in Magazine prison on 28 May against torture in custody ended two days later after the Prisons Commissioner promised appropriate action.

## *Something to hide*

SRI LANKA refused visas to a Norwegian human rights delegation in early May, triggering widespread condemnation within and outside the island. The delegation which included MPs planned the visit following Norway's decision to deport 280 rejected Tamil asylum-seekers.

Secretary General of the Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers (NOAS) Jan Joergensen declared that refusal indicated that Sri Lanka has something to hide. The Sri Lankan ambassador to Scandinavia SA David denies refusing visas. He says the delegation was advised to visit when Foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was present. Mr Kadirgamar was scheduled to attend the 9th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on 12 May in the Maldives.

NOAS Secretary General and his deputy eventually made a ten-day visit to Colombo and Vavuniya concluding that the situation remained unstable and complex but not ruling out return of refused asylum-seekers to the island.

Participating in a conference arranged by Norway's Christian Michaelson

Institute titled *Conflict in Sri Lanka: Human rights situation and refugees*, on 28 May in Bergen, UNHCR's representative Hiromitsu Mori said that Sri Lanka has achieved dramatic improvement in

human rights and it was now safe to return asylum-seekers. Sri Lankan human rights activist Charles Abeysekera asserted that both parties to the conflict lacked commitment to human rights and UNHCR was doing a disservice by recommending refugee returns.

International Bar Association President Desmond Fernando dismisses claims of improvement in human rights. Despite government promise, the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights remains unratified.

Mr Fernando has raised doubts over the commitment of those appointed to the new Human Rights Commission. Others say uncertainty over the future of the Human Rights Task Force since the Commission's appointment has lowered morale and has affected its work badly.

Mr Fernando points out that Sri Lanka has failed in its international obligations by continuing to allow Special Presidential Commissions even after UN Human Rights Committee's strong advice to repeal the relevant law as the Presidential Commissions do not conform to the basic principles of fairness.

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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