

15,000 flee Oddusuddan

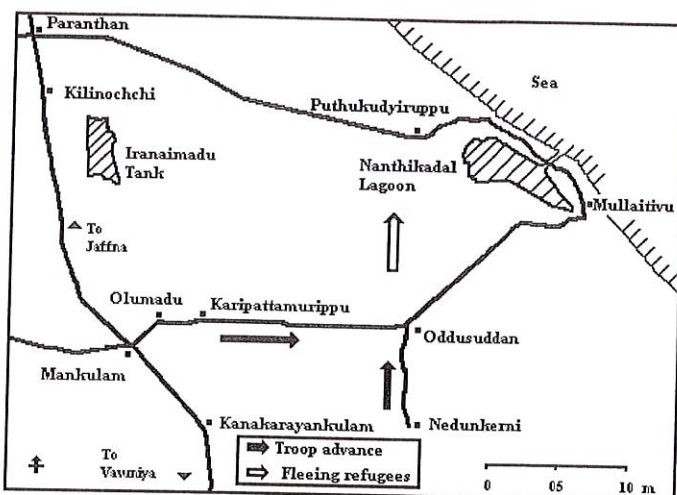
As preparations were underway in Sri Lanka to observe International Human Rights Day, the Army launched *Operation Rivi Bala* (Sun Power) in northern Vanni on 4 December and took control of 50 sq. mile territory around Oddusuddan, 30 miles north-east of Vavuniya. The operation is aimed at capturing Mullaitivu District, a stronghold of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The new operation was begun after *Operation Jayasikurui* (Certain Victory) - which aimed to open a landroute to Jaffna through Tiger territory - was called off in November in the face of heavy losses. In a two-pronged attack, Sri Lankan troops advanced east from Karipattamurippu and north from Nedunkerni. The advance was accompanied by heavy artillery shelling, but resistance from the LTTE was mild.

Over 15,000 people fled from Oddusuddan seeking refuge in schools and temples in Puthukudyiruppu, 11 miles north. According to Vanni Government Agents (GA) over 9,280 refugees were accommodated in ten schools. Heavy monsoon rains have brought further misery to the fleeing refugees. Two tanks in Kilinochchi overflowed in early December displacing over 250 more families.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says that a large number of people have been affected by floods in Mullaitivu District. According to the GAs, around 70% of the currently displaced people had been displaced from other areas earlier. Many now live in the open under trees without food or drinking water.

Further displacement means more problems in the Vanni. The government cut food supplies to the displaced people in the Vanni by 57%, that is from 440,000 recipients to 190,000, from 1 July. Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority N Obadage and Presidential



Human Disaster Management Task Force chief David Ratnavel visited Vanni in early December to assess the refugee situation. Reports say that the two officers also met Tiger cadre in LTTE-held areas. There is a major difference between the refugee figures submitted by the Army and the Vanni Government Agents. The Army allege that part of the food sent to refugees is spirited away by the LTTE.

Around 720 people who remained in Oddusuddan were interrogated at the Thanthondreeswarar temple for possible LTTE links and were thereafter sent to refugee camps in Vavuniya, further south. Press reports say women pleaded with the ICRC to ascertain the fate of 600 men missing after the Army capture of the Oddusuddan area. The military took 18 arrested people including several students to Vavuniya camps and 23 to Kalutara, ten miles south of Colombo, for further interrogation.

Five farmers on their way to the fields were shot dead by the Army on Nedunkerni Road in Mullaitivu District on 21 December. Four refugees were injured by Army shells in Katchilaimadu and Ganeshapuram. As shelling continued, cooperative union food stores were forced to shift to areas further north.

Deputy Defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatte had a close shave while visiting newly-captured areas in Oddusuddan, accompanied by a group of journalists on 6 December, when the Tigers fired shells

on their convoy. The minister, a Deputy Inspector General of Police and three armed force commanders escaped, but five other soldiers were killed and 42 wounded.

Although the new Army chief Srilal Weerasooriya claims that the military is winning the war, former Airforce chief Harry Goonetilleke believes that the new operation was launched to save the ruling People's Alliance in the

forthcoming Provincial Council elections. Professional commanders have hardly any voice in the conduct of the war and military decisions are taken by the Deputy Defence minister, Mr Goonetilleke says.

According to reports, after the LTTE captured Kilinochchi in September, President Chandrika Kumaratunge has become directly involved in planning military strategy, in her capacity as the constitutional commander-in-chief. Former Army chief Rohan Daluwatte has been appointed to head the newly created Joint Operations Bureau (JOB) for collective military planning.

The Airforce will acquire three Hercules transporter aircrafts from Britain and helicopters from Russia. Colombo's *Sunday Times* defence analyst Iqbal Athas says that the government has also placed an order for surface-to-air missiles and other air defence equipment to counter the threat of the *Air Tigers*.

With such emphasis on the war, hopes of peace initiatives, kindled following the visits of delegations from several countries, including South Africa, are fading. The two major political parties are drifting further apart as evidenced by the violence in the run-up to the Provincial Council elections in the North-West. In the circumstances, the suffering of the civilian population, particularly the refugees in the north-east, is likely to continue.

JAFNA

TULF Secretary killed

THE Tamil United Liberation Front's (TULF) Jaffna Secretary P Mathimugarajah, 50, was shot dead by a suspected LTTE gunman in Jaffna town on 26 December, while attending a commemoration ceremony.

Ten days earlier, the TULF-led Jaffna Municipal Council held its first meeting after the murder of Mayor Pon. Sivapalan in September. Mr Sivapalan was elected following the assassination of the Mayor Sarojini Yogeswaran in May. According to reports, Mr Mathimugarajah was expected to be nominated as the next Mayor of Jaffna.

The LTTE has already made it clear to the Jaffna population that support for government administration or programmes will not be tolerated. While TULF Vice President, V Anandasangari appealed to the LTTE in late December to allow moderate politicians to serve the people, the Tigers sent letters of threat to the Jaffna *Grama Sevakas* (Village Headmen). The letters warn the *Grama Sevakas* against providing information about LTTE cadre to the military and misuse of public funds.

Concern over violations by the Army continues. Soldiers fired inside a house during a search operation at Kilali on 7 December, killing three month-old A Amirthan and his brother Sujayanthan, 14. Three other members of the family were wounded. Three soldiers have been arrested in connection with the murders.

The Army arrested the Nallur *Grama*

Sevaka and a surveyor on 14 December. Kakkavil and Kondavil areas, north of Jaffna town, were searched by the Army on 21 December to track down LTTE cadre who are becoming increasingly active within the peninsula.

Despite earlier assurances, no official permission has been granted to local NGOs to function within Jaffna. As a result, international and national funding agencies are reluctant to support NGO work. NGOs say lack of funds may force the closure of 350 nursery schools in Jaffna affecting 8,000 children in 1999.

In Vavuniya, government officers complain that the limited resources are under strain following the arrival of more refugees after *Operation Rivi Bala* in the Vanni. There is concern that refugees arriving from the Vanni are being ordered by the security forces to sign a statement under Emergency regulations, agreeing to be detained in refugee camps. Activists allege that this is a violation of human rights.

Amnesty International says that eight people, including 16 year-old P Yogeswaran, have disappeared after arrest by the Army or Tamil group PLOTE, between October and December in Vavuniya. PLOTE has denied any involvement in the disappearances. Most of the disappeared are refugees, including three men from Sithamparapuram refugee camp which was set up to accommodate refugees returned to the island from India.

Award

Sunila Abeyssekera, founder member of Colombo human rights agency, the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality, was awarded the 1998 UN Human Rights Prize in December.

Rejected

Some 450 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers face deportation after the Federal Court rejected their appeal on 24 November, against an Australian government decision to cancel humanitarian visas.

Coalition

The National Alliance for Peace was inaugurated in Colombo on 12 December. The National Movement Against Terrorism attempted to disrupt the meeting alleging that the coalition supported the LTTE.

Chemmani

The US NGO Forum's Colleen Malone told the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus on 11 December, that the delay in probing mass graves at Chemmani is evidence of impunity enjoyed by the Sri Lankan military. The Human Rights Commission has written to the Attorney General again urging an investigation.

Certificates

The Presidential Commission on Disappearances says 18,136 applications for death certificates have been received, based on the findings of the three regional commissions. The current Commission has enquired into 2,500 of 10,135 complaints.

Agony on the border

THE Citizen's Commission on Border Villages says in an interim report on 10 December that the Army continues to use people in villages bordering Sri Lanka's north-east war zone as forced labour without wages. Villagers are often ordered to clean military camps, construct bunkers and clear jungles.

The civilian Commission, appointed in September, headed by SG Punchihewa and Leela Isaac, was mandated to enquire into the impact of the war on the population in border areas. The Commission recorded evidence of 192 people in eight districts on the North-East Province border and received over 1,900 written complaints.

The Sri Lankan security forces have carried out atrocities against Tamils in border villages and the LTTE has massacred Sinhalese civilians. The Commission says that there have been large number of rapes and sexual abuse by soldiers. Civil administration is disrupted and the war is cited as an excuse for failure to implement development programmes. There are shortages of food and medicines and villages lack water supply and health facilities.

The Commission further notes that the entire Vavuniya town is run like an Army camp. Giving evidence before the Commission in early December, Public Health Inspector Kamalakumar Chelliah

said that his family is held in a camp in Vavuniya since 1996 and police have denied permission to travel to Colombo, even for family weddings or funerals.

Jesurajah Thangamalar, also detained in a camp, told the Commission that her brother-in-law was abducted by unidentified men. Later she learned that he was in a Vavuniya military camp with both legs broken. The Army has denied that he is being detained.

The people in border areas say that only lasting peace in the country would ensure normalcy in border villages. They have earnestly pleaded with the government to pursue peace efforts and end the war without delay.

■ Military operation to capture Beirut camp

Roaming death squads

SIX Muslim civilians, including Meera Lebbe Kalithdeen, cutting firewood in the Punanai jungle in Batticaloa District were shot dead on 9 December. Two others were wounded. Batticaloa MP Ali Zahir Moulana alleges that the Army was responsible for the killings and has demanded an enquiry.

Arbitrary killings are an increasing concern in the east, where death squads freely roam. Local people say that in the first ten days of December, 15 civilians were killed and 13 wounded. The Army shot dead Chenkalady teacher S Nesanandaram in early December. The LTTE attacked soldiers in a tractor at Mylambaveli in Eravur on 10 December and two civilians in a bus nearby were

injured. Prison officer T Sivarasa was shot dead at Karaitivu on 12 December by unidentified persons. Five days later K Gunaratnam was shot and injured in Karuvakerni.

Student A Rajkumar, 17, was killed in a grenade attack at Valaichenai on 20 December. A soldier accused of the attack after Rajkumar's family failed to supply him liquor, has been arrested. The Tigers shelled Karuthapalam Army camp on Batticaloa-Chenkalady road on 26 December wounding two soldiers. Ten civilians, including six children, were injured when the Army retaliated by firing shells at Koduvamadu.

The LTTE assaulted a police post in Mancholai near Oddamavady on 14

December. The security forces launched a military operation on 31 December and 400 troops advanced west from Kiran towards jungles in Thoppigala aimed at capturing LTTE's *Beirut* camp. The Tigers intercepted the troops at Pulipainthakal. The Defence Ministry says six soldiers were killed and ten wounded. The LTTE claim that two Tigers died and large quantity of arms were captured.

In mid-December, Akkaraipatru area was searched a number of times and a man was detained. The security forces found a bomb in a bus stand at Mannampitiya, north-west of Batticaloa, on 14 December. Following the incident, 14 people were arrested and seven taken to Colombo for further enquiries.

Government restrictions on LTTE-controlled areas in north and west Batticaloa remain. Civilian suffering in these areas continues without proper transport and communication facilities. Posts minister MLAM Hisbullah says that schools in northern Vaharai area lack even the basic facilities.

President Chandrika is reported to have ordered that the Norwegian development agency NORAD-assisted development plan for the period 1999-2001, should be implemented under the direct supervision of the new North-East Governor Maj. Gen. Asoka Jayawardena. Reports also say that LTTE-held areas will not be included in the programme. Batticaloa MPs have protested, accusing the government of discrimination.

Fifty years on

ARTICLE 19, the London-based International Centre Against Censorship, says in a December report titled *Fifty years on: Censorship, conflict and media reform in Sri Lanka*, that developments in the island signal further deterioration in democratic practice affecting freedom of expression and association. These include the January Emergency regulation banning the LTTE, the manner in which numerous Bills were rushed through Parliament in the absence of the main opposition party and the use of Emergency powers to cancel provincial elections. While media reforms are delayed, criminal defamation cases have been brought against newspaper editors and press harassment has continued unabated. Censorship continues as before despite a civilian - Ariya Rubasinghe - replacing the military officer as censor. Emergency powers available to the President have been used to control areas of life with no connection to the conflict whatsoever. Tens of thousands of people displaced in the north-east feel caught-up between the warring sides, unable to access the media.

Article 19 further says that the LTTE is well known for its repressive regime and has ruthlessly killed members of all communities. Independent reporting of the war remain rare. Government and LTTE reports reflect the use of propaganda and misinformation in the pursuit of their objectives.

Article 19 has drawn attention to the Supreme Court decision declaring the authoritarian Broadcasting Authority Bill unconstitutional, and the April 1998 Colombo Declaration on Media Freedom and Responsibility. The agency urges the Sri Lankan government to lift censorship and implement its recommendations for the promotion of the freedom of expression.

THIRTY THREE Tamil families living near Pachchanur Army camp, three miles south of Muthur in Trincomalee District, were ordered by the military in early December to vacate the area. Another six families fled after J Francis was shot and wounded near the Army camp on 22 December. In mid-December nine Tamil youths were arrested in Muthur.

In early December, the Army introduced a new rule requiring people from LTTE areas entering Muthur to be in possession of identity cards. Farmers arriving to sell their produce are being turned away. Local *Grama Sevakas* (Village Headmen) say that 90% of the people living in villages east of Muthur have not been issued identity cards.

New rule

The ship *Lanka Muditha* arrived in Trincomalee on 12 December from Jaffna with 1,200 passengers and left for the peninsula with 782 people, including 267 refugees. A further 1,016 people left for Jaffna on 18 December. Over 190 refugees arrived in Trincomalee from Mannar in mid December.

In Mannar District, farmers say that if they are not supplied the 6,700 barrels of kerosene needed for the cultivation of 14,500 acres of land, food production in the area will be drastically affected. Security was tightened in early December on Mannar Island following reports of LTTE infiltration. Five Tigers were killed in an accidental bomb blast at Vidaltivu on 19 December.

Tamil detainees attempt to commit suicide

Unsafe return

COLOMBO human rights agency, the Forum for Human Dignity (FHD) says in a letter to the Committee of Inquiry into Undue Arrest and Detention (CIUAD), that a young Tamil woman repatriated from France is suffering torture at the Kotahena suburb police station. Muthuthamby Vanitha, was arrested on 19 November in a Kotahena lodge. The agency has appealed to the authorities to produce Ms Vanitha before the courts.

In a fundamental rights application to the Supreme Court, Hill Country farmer Somasundaram Shanmugarajah says he is suffering brutal torture at the Nuwara Eliya police Counter Subversive Unit (CSU). Mr Shanmugarajah was arrested at Ragala, nine miles north-east of Nuwara Eliya, on 10 October.

Article 19 points out that security operations in the south have regularly resulted in hundreds of Tamil people at a time being detained. Many people have recurring experience of such detentions, regardless of whether there is any evi-

dence about them for the police to probe. At times, especially when such operations intensify, Tamil civilians are likely to experience such operations as direct harassment on the basis of their ethnicity, says Article 19.

Suppiah Nesammah, 37, who returned to Colombo after working in Saudi Arabia was arrested by police on 13 November. A Colombo Magistrate ordered her release on 21 December. Police arrested 72 Tamil workers in rice mills at Minneriya, 107 miles north-east of Colombo. Currently they are detained in Anuradhapura prison. Tamil MP Joseph Pararajasingham says in a letter to the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission that the arrests are illegal and has demanded their release.

The Supreme Court awarded Rs 20,000 as compensation to Dr A Shanthakumar who was arrested in Hatton, 50 miles east of Colombo and illegally detained in police stations and prisons for 20 months.

Following bomb explosions in Galle, 65 miles south of Colombo, in late December, 25 Tamils were detained. Tamil MP and PLOTE leader D Sitharthan told Parliament in mid-December that Tamils working in Colombo port have left their jobs after they were demanded clearance from the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB).

Over 35 prisoners in Kalutara prison continued their hunger strike against detention without trial. Detainees Sritharan and Gowrithasan attempted to commit suicide by jumping off the roof of the prison and were seriously injured. There are currently 759 Tamil prisoners in Kalutara, 65 of them held for four or five years without trial. The protest ended after officers from the Attorney General's Department promised that charges will be filed in courts within a month. A committee headed by Justice Secretary Kamalini de Silva has been appointed to expedite the cases against the detainees.

The South African connection

LEADER of a cross-party South African delegation to Sri Lanka, Ebrahim Ebrahim told *Rupawahini* television on 14 December that Sri Lankans should learn from his country's experience and unite to resolve the island's problem. Mr Ebrahim said that South Africa is prepared to act as facilitator to bring the parties together for peace talks.

There has been speculation in the last few months of a South African peace initiative. Although some Western nations have expressed the opinion that South Africa's involvement will greatly improve the chances of peace, the Sri Lankan government remains adamant that foreign intervention is unwelcome.

Analysts say that the LTTE has established a base in South Africa with the assistance of the Tamil community in the country. African National Congress's (ANC) ascendancy to power has helped the Tigers. On gaining power, the ANC government banned arms exports to Sri Lanka. Following a Sri Lankan demand, the Mandela government is said to be probing an LTTE move to shift its headquarters from London to South Africa.

Foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar has expressed satisfaction that Pretoria will do everything possible to prevent the LTTE consolidating its foothold. Sources say that the support for

the Sri Lankan Tamil cause in the African nation precedes the establishment of the LTTE and Mr Kadirgamar faced difficulty in convincing South Africans that Sri Lanka is facing only a terrorist problem. According to reports, President Chandrika has requested South Africa to also investigate allegations of arms supply to the LTTE.

President Chandrika visited India in late December. Reports say that Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee assured her that New Delhi wishes to see Colombo resolve the ethnic problem on its own. Following her visit, Sri Lanka and India signed a trade agreement on 28 December.

President Chndrika's one-day delay in India, led to speculation that she met MDMK leader Vaiko (V Gopalasamy). MDMK is a constituent of the Indian coalition government and has been a long supporter of the LTTE. MDMK submitted a petition to the UN in October over human rights violations against the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Mr Vaiko is said to continue direct links with the LTTE leader V Prabhakaran.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information 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 enquires you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact
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