

## Battle Cry in the Vanni

OVER 20,000 people were displaced in March following three Sri Lankan Army operations in the northern Vanni, to secure territory held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

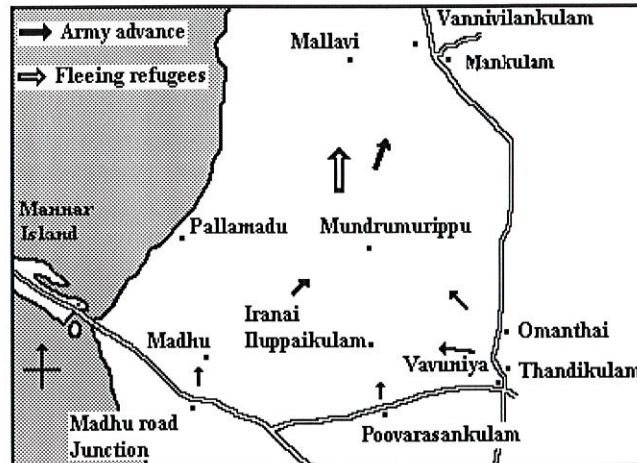
In *Operation Rana Gosha* (Battle Cry), launched on 4 March, the Army advanced from Poovarasankulam, nine miles west of Vavuniya and from Thandikulam, three miles north of Vavuniya. Iranai Iluppaikulam, six miles north of Poovarasankulam was captured. Troops advanced 10 miles further north on 6 March and annexed Mundrumurippu, where they were joined by another column moving from Omanthai, on Vavuniya-Jaffna road. The Army pushed further north-east to take Vannivilankulam, a mile north-west of Mankulam.

The Sri Lankan government says 220 sq mile territory was captured in the operation. The Army now controls 101 of the 102 *Grama Sevaka* (Village Headman) Divisions in Vavuniya District. Reports say that the Sri Lankan government plans to open a new township at Poovarasankulam and extend the northern railway line to Puliyankulam, 14 miles north of Vavuniya.

Around 4,000 permanent residents of these areas and another 10,000 refugees fled north to Mulankavil, Thunukkai and Vinayagapuram. Reports say, some have found refuge in schools and others are living in the open without any relief. According to Vanni Government Agents 13,000 civilians remained in the Army captured territory. Government officers began registering their names and issuing two weeks' dry rations.

As troops advanced, artillery shelling caused civilian deaths and injury. Three people, including Nageswaran Natheesa, 12, were killed at Thandiyankulam, east of Mankulam. Three more civilians died in Nedunkandal and Mundrumurippu.

The LTTE had earlier denied permission to civilians travelling north from



Poovarasankulam. But humanitarian agencies used the route to reach Mallavi and Thunukkai areas where large number of refugees currently live.

The Army say that in *Operation Bunker Buster* on 16 March, seven LTTE bunkers were destroyed south and west of Paranthan. Three days later, the military launched *Operation Rana Gosha II* in Mannar District. Troops advanced from Madhu Road junction on Vavuniya-Mannar road and brought Madhu and Palampiddy, 12 miles north, under control and then proceeded north-east to Mundrumurippu. Another column moved from Mundrumurippu and joined the first column at Palampiddy, 12 miles north of Madhu junction, on 22 March. The Army says another 125 sq. miles territory has been captured.

Around 5,000 acres of rice, ready for harvest, around Mallavi have been abandoned because of the military operations. Food supply to LTTE-controlled areas in the Vanni was disrupted from 18 March. International NGOs say while relief stocks are already inadequate to cope with earlier displacement, large number of new refugees will lead to a serious problem in the Vanni.

A further 5,000 people fled when the Army shelled LTTE artillery positions in Vidataltivu and Pappamodai in northern Mannar in mid-March. A medical centre in Pallamadu and a church in Vidataltivu were damaged. The people took refuge in

Kalliyady, further north. The Army attack followed Tiger shelling of Thallady military base, three miles south of Mannar town on 17 March, in which 11 soldiers and three civilians died and 19 others were wounded. The Airforce bombed Mullaitivu District on 20 March killing a woman and injuring three others. The following day, a girl student of the Mulliyavalai School was blown to pieces by an Airforce bomb.

During *Operation Rana Gosha*, there was hardly any resistance from the LTTE. Analysts say the Tigers were taken by surprise and misjudged the direction of Army advance. The LTTE began moving its bases in Mallavi area in late February and told the people to be ready to evacuate. Some 400 families in Mullikulam were ordered to leave on 8 March. Some observers believe that the Tigers are conserving energy to pounce Jaffna.

The government arranged for a team of Colombo journalists to visit the newly captured areas on 15 March. Deputy Defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatte told the journalists that the LTTE now controlled only 3,000 sq. mile territory and another 20,000 new Army recruits are needed to defeat the Tigers before December this year.

There are 20,000 refugees in the open relief centre near Madhu Church, the holiest Catholic shrine in Sri Lanka. In late March, Mannar Catholic Bishop Rayappu Joseph demanded the Army to vacate the church area to maintain it as a demilitarised zone. According to reports, the military has begun constructing bunkers within the area. Bishop Joseph says that campaign posters of the ruling People's Alliance for the 6 April provincial council elections show a picture of President Chandrika Kumaratunge with the Madhu Church in the background. *Operation Rana Gosha* may have been launched to boost the chances of the PA in the elections, observers say.

JAFFNA

## Skeletons in stadium

IN the presence of over 50 Colombo journalists and weeping Jaffna women, magistrate N Arulsagan supervised the gathering of soil samples on 5 March at Chemmani in Jaffna, to determine whether the mass graves had been tampered with and ordered the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to submit a report on 26 March. Mr Arulsagan was flown in from Colombo after Jaffna magistrate SAE Ekanathan accused the government of interfering with the judiciary.

Mr Arulsagan was not present on 26 March to examine the CID report. The police had "forgotten" to arrange for the magistrate to travel to Jaffna from Colombo. On the same day, municipal workers found many human skeletons in Jaffna's Duraipappah stadium.

Tamil MPs have demanded foreign forensic experts to be included in the Chemmani probe. Others say soldier Somaratne Rajapakse should be allowed into Jaffna to identify the mass graves. Mr Rajapakse, who was convicted in the student Krishanthi Kumarasamy murder case, says he knows the location of the graves where 400 Tamils killed in Army custody in 1996, are buried.

The current Presidential Commission has a mandate to inquire into disappearances before January 1995 and has no authority to probe the Chemmani disappearances. As the Commission began its enquiries in Jaffna on 15 March, the peninsula's NGO consortium expressed

concern over arbitrary arrests and violation of basic human rights. Reports say over 30 people were detained in February. S Sasikaran, a returnee from the Vanni, was arrested at Karanavai in Vadamaratchy on 7 March.

Five members of a family from Kottady are detained at the Kankesanthurai Army camp. The Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission (HRC) has been given access to a list of 1,408 names of detainees in the military base during 1996 and 1997. Meanwhile, current detainees in the camp have complained to the HRC that they are not provided sufficient food.

The Jaffna people are also deeply concerned over government preparations to acquire 12,000 acres of private land in Kankesanthurai and Palaly areas under a gazette notification issued on 7 October 1985. Resettlement has not been allowed in these areas which includes 35 of the 435 *Grama Sevaka* (Village Headman) divisions in Jaffna. Although presidential secretary P Balapatabendi denied government intention, reports in late March said that President Chandrika has ordered stay of the acquisition.

LTTE's *Pistol Group* shot and injured two policemen at Nallur in early March. Two soldiers were wounded in a landmine attack near Jaffna town on 17 March. An alleged Army informant K Mayilvaganam was abducted from his home in Erlalai by suspected LTTE cadre on 23 March and shot dead.

### Death penalty

The Sri Lankan government announced in mid-March that the death penalty will be reintroduced. Since June 1976, death sentences have been commuted to life imprisonment. Under current law, courts may impose the death sentence for murder, abetment to suicide, treason or drug trafficking.

### Weapons ship

Colombo newspaper *Sunday Times* says that an Indian navy operation to intercept LTTE trawler *MV Mariamma* in early March on Sri Lanka's request, failed. The navy found the vessel 125 miles west of Andaman Islands, without persons or weapons on board.

### Arrest

In February, Greek police arrested Eftihios Zervoudakis, involved in the sinking of a vessel and causing the death of 280 asylum-seekers, including 92 Sri Lankans, between Malta and Sicily on 25 December 1996.

### Assault

Colombo Sinhala newspaper *Lakbima* Journalist Srilal Priyantha was abducted and brutally assaulted on 14 March. Mr Priyantha has written on corruption in the defence establishment.

### Meeting

The Foreign ministers' meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Nuwara Eliya on 18 March postponed decision on a South Asian Economic Union by the year 2020.

## Refugee ordeal

UNP MP Jayalath Jayawardena says that the refugees in the Vanni suffer without sufficient food, medicines and drinking water. Diseases continue to spread. According to press reports a number of people died of septicaemia and malaria in Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi districts during February.

Health Department officials say that medicines for the first quarter of 1999 were sent to the Vanni in early March following complaints of acute shortages in hospitals. In early March, the Vanni Citizens Committee handed to the UNHCR office in Mallavi, another petition addressed to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan regarding the suffering of

civilians in the region. A government survey to determine the number of refugees, scheduled for early March, was disrupted following military operation *Rana Gosha* and denial of permission by the LTTE. This means that the 57% cut in food to Tiger-held areas will continue. NGOs say new displacement will cause further misery.

In Vavuniya District, a Jaffna woman has complained to the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission that her husband K Senthilkumar, 22, was taken away by the security forces on 28 January from Poonthottam refugee camp in Vavuniya District. His whereabouts are unknown. Around 12,000 people who wish to go to

Jaffna or to southern areas remain in camps in Vavuniya. Many of them have been denied permission by the security forces to travel to the south.

In Vavuniya, despite the appeal of the local people, the Tamil groups fighting the LTTE on the side of the Army continued to clash. PLOTE supporter Velayutham Pavanidevi, 53, was abducted by suspected TELO cadre on 19 March. Her body was later found at Pattakkadu on Mannar-Vavuniya road. A supporter of TELO was killed the following day. Three policemen and four Home Guards were killed in an LTTE landmine attack on a patrol at Dickwewa, five miles east of Vavuniya on 17 March.

## ■ The LTTE suspected of abducting fishermen

# Retaliation

TWENTY FIVE people were injured when soldiers ran amok assaulting civilians in four villages around Valaichenai in Batticaloa District on 12 March. Ten of the wounded were admitted to hospital. The attack on civilians is believed to be in retaliation for the LTTE killing of a policeman a day earlier. Immediately following the killing, soldiers assaulted villagers on Union Colony wounding four. There are mounting problems in Valaichenai as the Tigers and the Army disregard safety of civilians.

A soldier was injured when the LTTE shelled Kinnayady Army camp 11 March. The Army searched villages in Valaichenai on 15 March and detained four youths after parading them before

*talayattis* or masked informers. The following day, the Army interrogated over 75 people in Valaichenai town and detained several youths. In mid-March, the Army also began demolishing parapet walls around buildings in the town.

Restrictions on LTTE-controlled areas north of Vaharai continue, the military say, to prevent food reaching the Tigers. A person can take only 5kg rice or wheat flour and 2kg sugar beyond the Army camp at Vaharai. Reports say there is an acute shortage of food in Kathiraveli, five miles further north.

In Trincomalee District, the 2,500 families in Tiger-held Eechilampathai must obtain permits from Mahindapura Army camp to take food home.

Mobs forced closure of shops in Trincomalee town on 4 March, after nine Sinhalese fishermen went missing in the Mullaitivu sea. Relatives suspect that the fishermen were abducted by the LTTE. Seven soldiers were killed in a Tiger landmine attack at Othiyamalai in late March. The Navy say eight *Sea Tigers* were killed in a clash at sea near Nilaveli, eight miles north of Trincomalee town. The Navy and *Sea Tigers* clashed again on 16 March, 24 miles north of Trincomalee.

Clashes in the eastern sea continue to affect civilian travel to Jaffna from Trincomalee. In late March, the ship *Lanka Muditha* left for Jaffna with 600 refugees and 660 other passengers. Reports say that the Navy denied permission for the ship *Ocean Success*, hired by private traders, to carry food to Jaffna after clearance by the Defence Ministry.

In Amparai District, the LTTE launched an attack on the police Special Task Force (STF) at Sinnawathai on 5 March. Seven Tigers were killed and another was captured. Six security force personnel, including Inspector S Ratnaweera, were seriously wounded.

The police post adjoining Digamadulla MP ULM Muhaideen's house in Sammanthurai came under grenade attack on 17 March. The attackers also shot and injured three Muslim civilians. Following these incidents, posters appeared in Veeramunai village, north-east of Amparai town, threatening Tamil residents.

# Asylum

ACCORDING to UNHCR's March 1999 *Background Paper on Sri Lanka for the European Union High Level Working Group (HLWG) on Asylum and Migration*, 170,300 asylum applications were made from Sri Lankans in Europe and North America between 1990 and 1998 and 50,080 (30%) were granted Convention refugee status. A further 16,700 were given humanitarian leave to remain. The HLWG is expected to submit an analysis on an Action Plan relating to freedom, security and asylum, which includes economic cooperation with the country of refugee origin, assistance in the reception of displaced people in the region of refugee origin, safety of returning refugees and internal settlement alternatives. Sri Lanka is among the six countries selected for analysis by the HLWG. In Europe, of the 13,100 applicants in 1998, only 350 (2.7%) were granted refugee status and 820 (6.2%) humanitarian leave, which are the lowest rates in the past nine years. UNHCR says that due to the armed conflict, the presence of the security forces, the presence of militant groups which operate relatively free in certain areas, the overwhelming concern of the authorities with matters of security and Emergency rule over the whole island since August 1998, refugee claims of Sri Lankan asylum-seekers must be examined on merits. When examining such claims, both state and non-state actors of persecution must be considered. Short-term detentions, occasional arrests and harassment may, cumulatively, amount to persecution. No Sri Lankan asylum-seeker should be barred from having the refugee claim examined on its merits, on the basis of an internal flight alternative. The availability of the flight alternative must be determined in each case, considering the background of the refugee, the reasons for fear of persecution and the restrictions on the freedom of movement in the country, says UNHCR.

# Pistol Group

TWO policemen were shot dead by LTTE's *Pistol Group* in Mannar town on 25 March. Two others were seriously wounded. Following the incident, 30 people were arrested. The next day, the police searched Mannar town and took into custody a number of people. Reports say soldiers attacked civilians during the search. The Tigers ambushed a police patrol at Adampan, six miles south-east of Mannar, on 31 March, killing five policemen and injuring three others.

A week earlier, the LTTE killed three policemen in Murunkan, 14 miles south-east of Mannar. On the same day, the Army shot dead five civilians near Uyilankulam alleging that they attempted to smuggle banned goods into LTTE-

held areas. LTTE activity in the western sea has increased, observers say. The Sri Lankan Navy intercepted a boat carrying fuel from India, near Nachchikudah, 24 miles north-east of Mannar, on 7 March. Nine people in the boat, including three Indian nationals, were detained. The security forces imposed a ban on fishing in Mannar sea for a week from 8 March. The ban affected 10,000 fishermen in Mannar District.

Mannar Government Agent SM Croos says the issue of dry rations to refugees in Mannar, suspended in November last year, has been resumed. Further south in Chilaw, two bombs on 29 March caused damage to a telecommunication office. Police arrested four suspects.

## The Tigers intensify operations in the south

# Assassination attempt

CHIEF Police Inspector of the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID), Mohamed Nilabdeen was injured by a woman *Black Tiger* suicide bomber at Mount Lavinia, south of Colombo, on 16 March. Two other civilians were killed in the blast. An accomplice, *Jeevendra*, took cyanide and killed himself when apprehended by a policeman.

Following the attack, the security forces searched Ratmalana, Mount Lavinia, Dehiwela and the Tamil-dominated Colombo suburbs of Wellawatte and Kotahena. Over 50 Tamils were taken into custody. The police arrested four Tiger suspects from a house in Wattala, north of Colombo, where suicide bomber M Maryqueens is said to have lived. Reports say a police Sub-Inspector, suspected of links with *Jeevendra*, has also been detained.

The LTTE seems to have resumed attacks on high profile targets. A large number of bomb attacks had been carried out in southern Sri Lanka in the last one

year, but these were mainly aimed at disrupting electricity supply and telecommunication. A bomb exploded inside a bus at Colombo's central bus stand in Pettah on the night of 9 March, killing a passenger and wounding 15 others. Over 100 people were arrested in Pettah following the incident.

Another bomb badly damaged a train in Dematagoda suburb railyard on the same night. An electricity transformer in Pettah was also blasted with a bomb. A week earlier, a bomb ripped through a train passing Narahenpita railway station. The Police say a new unit of Tigers from the Mannar area has entered Colombo, seeking high profile targets.

The police allege that the directives by the Committee of Inquiry into Undue Arrest and Detention (CIUAD) which came in to effect on 1 January have helped LTTE infiltration into Colombo. The CIUAD, headed by Culture minister Lakshman Jayakody, was set up in July 1998 following complaints of security

force harassment of the Tamil community, to ensure humane treatment of people during arrest and detention. The work of the CIUAD is also expected to reduce the number of fundamental rights applications relating to arrest and detention to the Supreme Court.

The January CIUAD directives said, among others, that permanent residents of Colombo need not register with the police but all visitors over the age of 10 must register. Visitors need not go to the police station for registration. It would suffice if the chief occupant of the house submits the relevant forms to the police along with the visitor's photograph. Police were also directed to allow visitors to stay any number of days in Colombo without demanding the reasons.

MP and CIUAD member, MM Zuhair says that the anti-harassment body has acted within the law and denies that its directives have hampered police investigations or helped LTTE infiltration into southern areas.

## Repatriation from Norway and Germany

TAMIL MP Joseph Pararajasingham appealed to the Norwegian government in early March to be extremely cautious in repatriating Tamil asylum-seekers to Sri Lanka where the situation is dangerous for returning refugees.

In a letter to the President of the Norwegian Parliament, Kirsti Kolle Grondahl who led a parliamentary delegation to Sri Lanka in March, he says that around 1,650 Tamils are in detention without trial. Many suffer torture in custody. Tamils are arrested at the airport under the Immigrants and Emigrants (Amendment) Act 42 of 1998, which disallows bail, provides for mandatory sentence and removes discretion of courts against the concept of a fair trial.

Some 400 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers may be deported from Norway and over 40 have already been removed. Sources say at least 50 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers have been deported from Germany in the last six months. The UK-based National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns says asylum-seeker V Balachandran, 39, committed suicide in a German prison on 23 March, before deportation to Sri Lanka.

The German Foreign Ministry claims that the 700 people disappeared in Jaffna in 1996 were LTTE cadre who had infiltrated the peninsula after its capture by the Army. The Ministry further claims that the Sri Lankan authorities implement

the Emergency regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act in a pragmatic way and regarding torture, have taken steps to improve the situation.

But the US State Department reports that security forces continue to torture and mistreat detainees and the government has not made regulations under torture law to prosecute security personnel. In a March Background Paper, UNHCR, quoting sources, reports on torture, disappearances, extra-judicial executions and mass arrests of Tamils in Colombo.

UNHCR continues its "passive" or indirect monitoring of rejected Sri Lankan asylum-seekers from Switzerland and informally assists Denmark and Netherlands to check on returned refugees. UNHCR also receives information regarding refugee returns from Norway. UNHCR reiterates its view that Sri Lankan asylum-seekers whose claims have been processed through full and fair procedures and found not to fulfil the refugee criteria may be returned safely to Sri Lanka. This, UNHCR adds, does not obviate other reasons for non-return such as is contemplated under the UN Convention on Torture.

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 enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact  
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