

## The food aid weapon

The fragile peace that followed the 18 month-long talks in Sri Lanka descended into chaos in June 1990 after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) overran 17 police stations in the east triggering full-scale war. The fighting was the culmination of the struggle for dominance between the Tigers and the Sri Lankan military after the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) left the island in late March 1990.

The Sri Lankan government introduced Emergency regulations on 9 August 1991 [Emergency (Restriction of Transport of Articles) Regulations No 1 of 1991] banning 41 goods to the north, including medicines, surgical instruments, bandages, fertilizers and fuel. Although the items were listed, the Defence Ministry would, without warning, add restrictions on other items such as bicycles and matches which could presumably be used by the LTTE. The military also imposed severe restrictions on Tiger-held areas in the east.

Even after humanitarian agencies obtained permits from the Defence Ministry, local military commands would impose their own arbitrary restrictions on every possible relief item: towels, clothes, buckets, hurricane lanterns, plastic sheeting, drugs and even soap and oral dehydration salt.

The government declared that it was the sole agency responsible for food supply to the north-east and imposed restrictions on food. UN Special Representative on Internally Displaced Persons, Francis Deng, who visited Sri Lanka in November 1993, told the UN Human Rights Commission that the 'displaced voiced complaints about the inadequate nutritional value of the dry rations'.

As peace talks between the People's Alliance government and the LTTE began in October 1994, some of the Emergency regulations were relaxed, but were reintroduced when fighting broke out in May 1995. The military launched a series of operations in Jaffna beginning in July with *Operation Leap Forward*. Senior state officer Government Agent (GA) K Ponnambalam issued a desperate plea in July 1995 to President Chandrika

*Humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons shall not be diverted, in particular for political or military reasons.*

Principle 24 (2)  
UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

for food and medicines for 200,000 people displaced by the operation.

The Army captured Jaffna town in December 1995 and brought the peninsula under control by May 1996. But before capture, the Tigers forcibly evacuated 280,000 people to the mainland Vanni across the Jaffna lagoon. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) officers sounded a warning after visiting the north in March 1996 that insufficient government food aid was reaching the refugees.

In June 1996, the Vanni GAs revealed that they were prohibited from providing assistance to 60,000 refugees who fled to the mainland after *Operation Sunray II* in eastern Vadammaratchy area of Jaffna in April 1996. The government claimed that all the people either remained in the eastern part or returned to western Valikaman. The government has never acknowledged the existence of these 60,000 refugees.

Around 200,000 people in Kilinochchi District, many from Jaffna, fled further south following Army's *Operation Sath Jaya III* (Truth's Victory) in September 1996. International agencies expressed concern over the shortage of food. The UNHCR urged the government to ensure that food supplies reached the Vanni refugees. French Medical agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) said in late 1996 that the Defence Ministry had rejected requests for drugs. The Ministry had cut medical supplies by 75%.

As the ICRC warned of a major disaster in 1996, Vavuniya GA K Ganesh said that Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts in the Vanni needed 2,125 lorry loads of

food a month but the military permitted only 1,355 lorries at the Thandikulam crossing point. The government maintained that there were only 199,000 refugees in the Vanni, whereas the NGOs estimated over 350,000 refugees. Presidential Secretary K Balapatabendi appointed a three member committee in October 1996 to assess the number of refugees. The Committee submitted a report without visiting the Vanni, which remains unpublished.

The difficult conditions in the Vanni and military operations forced people to flee to India from the western coast. Since August 1996, 15,000 new refugees arrived in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, adding to the 56,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in government camps and an estimated 100,000 living outside. Under the UNHCR-involved repatriation programme, 54,059 refugees were returned to Sri Lanka since 1992, before it was suspended in 1996.

Shelter and water supply remained as key concerns of NGOs in 1996. Only 6,197 of the 12,750 lorry-loads of food needed for the period May-October 1996 were allowed into the Vanni. Under-nutrition made people susceptible to disease and the acute shortage of medicines made treatment at hospitals difficult. In the three months from October 1996, 147 people died in Vanni hospitals of disease, including malaria and typhoid.

Senior government officers in the Vanni said that most could have been saved with adequate medicines, medical equipment and hospital space. Reports said that 150 people died of disease in January and February 1997 in 16 refugee camps in the Pooneryn area. In March, 58 people died in Mallavi and Kilinochchi hospitals and in April and May 1997, 61 died in Akkarayankulam hospital.

Dry rations to the Vanni refugees were suspended from 1 January 1997 following a decision to end relief to areas where PA government's poverty alleviation *Samurthi* programme was implemented. After the GAs brought to the notice of President Chandrika that *Samurthi* was not being implemented in



most areas of the north-east, dry rations were restored on 23 March.

The Army launched *Operation Edibala* (Gallant Force) in February 1997 and captured southern Mannar District, linking up with Mannar Island. Over 130 Tamil refugees fleeing to India that month drowned when an overcrowded trawler capsized at sea within a mile from Nachchikudah, 26 miles north of Mannar.

GA SM Croos rushed to Colombo twice in late April for talks with the Essential Services Commissioner (ESC), after the Army imposed a ban on food lorries into LTTE-controlled areas in Mannar District from 24 April, fearing that 70,000 people may face starvation. Vanni military commander ordered the 15,000 refugees in Madhu Church area to come to centres at Uyilankulam or Madhu Road junction, 30 miles south, to claim the dry rations. But fear and the long distance put off the refugees. Over 60,000 refugees in the region suffered without adequate food or medicines. NGOs warned that the situation may reach crisis proportions, as more refugees poured into Madhu area.

The government decided to stop relief payments to over 350,000 refugees in LTTE-controlled Vanni, from 22 April 1997, replacing the Rs 50 for each family of five or more, by dry rations. Aid workers said the new measure, which meant the slash of food assistance by 40%, was designed to force refugees to leave the Vanni, and would lead to further deterioration in refugee conditions.

Over 50,000 people fled northwards seeking safety as the Army launched *Operation Jayasikurui* (Certain Victory) from Vavuniya in May 1997, to open a land supply route to Jaffna through LTTE-controlled Vanni. By July 1997, another 20,000 entered Mannar where health and sanitary conditions deteriorated. Six refugee children died of diarrhoea in Mannar District in July.

The ESC, by a 9 May circular letter to all government officers, ordered the arbitrary reduction of the people receiving food aid. According to WFP, food supply to the Vanni for May 1998 amounted to 1,623 tons, some 1,098 tons less than April deliveries and more than 1,800 tons below the cumulative monthly average for the previous 24 months. The reduction in fuel of the agreed 8,000 barrels a month by 5,350 barrels, badly affected education, health and agriculture.

That month, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) expressed grave concern for

the refugees, 'who lack basic sanitation, education, food, clothing and health care'. CESCR was alarmed that under-nourishment among refugee women and children was as high as 70%.

Despite these concerns, the ESC reduced dry rations to refugees in the Vanni by 57% from 1 July 1998. Over 440,000 people in the Vanni received dry rations, but from July the number was cut down to 190,000. The government said that the food was reaching the LTTE. Observers said that even if part of the food ended up in Tiger hands, the cuts were arbitrary and had the strategic aim of pressurizing the LTTE and forcing the Jaffna people to leave the Vanni.

In Jaffna, the number of people receiving food aid was reduced by 40% from 416,000. On 27 August 1998, President Chandrika ordered that from 1 September 1998, refugees in Army held areas of Jaffna, Vavuniya and Mannar should receive aid at the same level as in June 1998. The food-cut in LTTE-controlled areas, however, continued.

British NGO Save the Children said in August 1998 that the government economic embargo in the Vanni had resulted in insufficient food stuff, drugs, kerosene, agricultural material, spare parts and even clothes, water jars, pens and school books. Children disabled by the war were unable to procure prosthetics and other rehabilitative material.

Restrictions and delays in agricultural inputs has in part been responsible for a substantial reduction in agricultural production with resulting decrease in jobs and income. The restrictions together with rains had increased mortality and morbidity in children. Existing health structures were undermined and drug quotas continued to be cut and delayed.

In Army's *Operation Rivi Bala* (Sun Power) in December 1998, 15,000 people were displaced in Oddusuddan in Mullaitivu District and another 70,000 in the four phases of *Operation Rana Gosha* (Battle Cry) began in March 1999 in Vavuniya and Mannar districts.

Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority N Obadage and Presidential Human Disaster Management Task Force chief David Ratnavel visited the Vanni in early December 1998 to assess the refugee situation. A survey to determine the number of refugees was scheduled for March 1999, but the launch of *Operation Rana Gosha* that month made the survey impossible.

International agencies expressed concern over the sharp deterioration in the humanitarian situation in the Vanni following *Operation Rana Gosha IV* in Mannar in June 1999, which resulted in the cutting off of the food supply route to the Vanni. NGOs said that there was a backlog of 975 lorryloads of government rations to the Vanni. After a new supply route was opened through Mankulam following negotiations between the LTTE and the Army, supplies resumed in August 1999. In October, the Vanni Army commander confirmed suspicions that backlogs will not be supplied.

In a 1998 Relief and Rehabilitation Network paper, the author Koenraad Van Brabant said that the single most important impediment to effective humanitarian coordination is the Sri Lankan government and, more particularly, the military, retaining the final authority and keeping agencies outside their mechanisms.

Van Brabant further said that although there were signals from the LTTE command that it might exercise a greater control over humanitarian work of international agencies, as it did over local NGOs, this did not occur. Others say that the Tigers take part of the food supply for stock to control the food situation in the Vanni. In the east, there are signs that humanitarian agencies will come under greater LTTE control following government suspension of development projects in Tiger-held areas.

It is obvious that control over the Tamil civilians in the north is an important aspect of the political and military strategies of both parties to the conflict. Military and political objectives are allowed to override humanitarian concerns, though not to the point of creating a mass emergency, which would generate international pressure.

As the suffering of the Vanni displaced continues, the 1998 recommendation of the CESCR remains relevant: "The Committee strongly recommends the establishment of government mechanisms to facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance and to strictly monitor and ensure that the intended recipients actually receive the assistance".

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