

HISTORIC EXODUS AND MILITARY OCCUPATION OF JAFFNA, SRI LANKA OCTOBER 1995

by Rev Dr S.J. Emmanuel

Bsc (Ceylon), PhD (Rome), Vicar General of Diocese Jaffna, Professor/Rector of St. Xavier Seminary, Jaffna

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The night of Monday October 30, 1995 was a black night in the entire history of the age-old city of Jaffna. Never had history witnessed such an exodus of fear and panic stricken people screaming and squeezing themselves out of the narrow roads and lanes of Jaffna. The nearly half million population in and around the town was literally on the roads in pouring rain inching its way out of the densely populated town into the sparsely populated and ill-equipped suburban villages of Chavakachcheri, Kodikamam and Palai. It was for everyone a flight for survival.

Why was this exodus?

In 1987 when the then Minister of Security Mr. Lalith Athulathmudali suggested that the people of Jaffna move South of Vavuniya so that the Army could take on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a straight war, the Tamil population laughed it out as a joke. It was such an impossible and ridiculous task to evacuate the large population of the once second largest town of Sri Lanka. But the 'impossible' was happening before our eyes in 1995.

The fear and horror the Tamils have for Sri Lankan Forces are well known. The Colombo Government kept proclaiming loudly to the world outside that the Forces were moving in 'to liberate the Tamils from the clutches of the LTTE.

But the bitter lessons the Tamils have learnt for four decades in the hands of the Forces were never to be forgotten. Hence at every military operation they were fleeing with all their might away from an advancing army as if hell had been let loose! The Riviresa operation and exodus out of Jaffna was no exception.

Those who sit in authority in Colombo continue to think that their army is disciplined and courteous, and this may be true to a certain extent in the South where an almost hundred per cent Sinhala army moves at ease amongst its own people.

But when they are among those whom they consider as potential terrorists, if not LTTEs and hence against them, their behaviour is charged with fear and anger reaching a new level of state terrorism.

Even the break down of the cessation of hostilities on the 19th April 1995, many Tamils know, was largely due to the Army being unwilling to implement or give in to the decisions of the Government.

Hence on the whole the Tamil experience of the Sinhala army during the last few decades was never a fearless one, but one fraught with unforgettable lessons of death, destruction, loot, rape, bribery etc. And this hard learnt lesson cannot be easily erased off the Tamil mind.

Waves of Displacements

Already as soon as a result of military operations against the LTTE, the Peninsular had experienced many waves of heavy displacements.

As soon as Eelam War II started in 1990, the Army had forcibly occupied the villages of Mathagal, Ilavalai, Vasavilan and the islands of Mandaitivu, Kayts, Delft and Pooneryn.

The people who fled the atrocities of that military occupation moved into Manipay, Sandilipay, Chunnakam and even Kili-nochchi.

They were living in sheds and tents without proper shelter, they had lost their

means of livelihood (fishing) and the children were accommodated in make-shift huts under some teachers. This situation had already continued for almost five years.

In the five months interval between the breakdown of talks between the Government and the LTTE on April 29, 1995 and the consequent commencement of an all out Sri Lankan attack on the Jaffna Peninsula, a series of three displacements in quick succession were caused by three military operations.

After much planning and shopping for weapons from many countries around the world, the Government heaped up nearly four thousand troops with sophisticated weapons in about five large army camps around this Peninsula to take over Jaffna.

The Sri Lankan Army's first major operation in Ealam War III was 'Leap Forward'.

Besides the heavy death toll for the Armed Forces and the LTTE, the destruction of homes and the displacement of people from almost 78 square kilometres of the Peninsula, Jaffna town witnessed the second wave of displacement from Valigamam West and its peripheries to the centre of the Peninsula.

Although the LTTE pushed back the forces and reclaimed the territory with their 'Leap Forward' operation, the army kept threatening the population from their Palaly Base with long-range artillery shells. And with limited operation like the 'Shake Hands' the people didn't have the courage to go back to their badly destroyed homes for fear of land mines.

Soon afterwards, in a bid to extend the Air Base at Palali to suit the landing of planes with the monsoonal changes in the direction of winds, operation Lightning Thunder started moving in the direction of Atchuvely.

This brought in a third wave of displaced people into the Jaffna area.

The newly occupied area of the Army around Atchuvely, Urumpirai was the rich red soil region of Jaffna which produces very good fruits and vegetables for the Peninsula.

The people were chased by shelling and bombing had to leave behind all their fruits of labour to the Forces and flee.

The Jaffna population, now swollen by many waves of displacements was already experiencing heavy shortage of fish, vegetables and fruit and were driven further into malnourishment.

Above all these, the shortages caused by the inhuman embargo of the Government on essentials for life and the army occupation of Tamil areas with vegetables and fruits, there hangs over the dense population of residents and refugees in Jaffna, the dark clouds of an imminent major military operation to capture Jaffna with repeated reminders by artillery shelling.

Presidential Excuses

Just before the longer 'Riviresa' operation towards Jaffna, the Sri Lankan war planes dropped two types of handbills in Tamil around 10pm on October 12 and 13, 1995.

Because of the monsoon winds, the handbills were carried largely into the army occupied areas. By some chance, some fell in the fields around Kilinachchi.

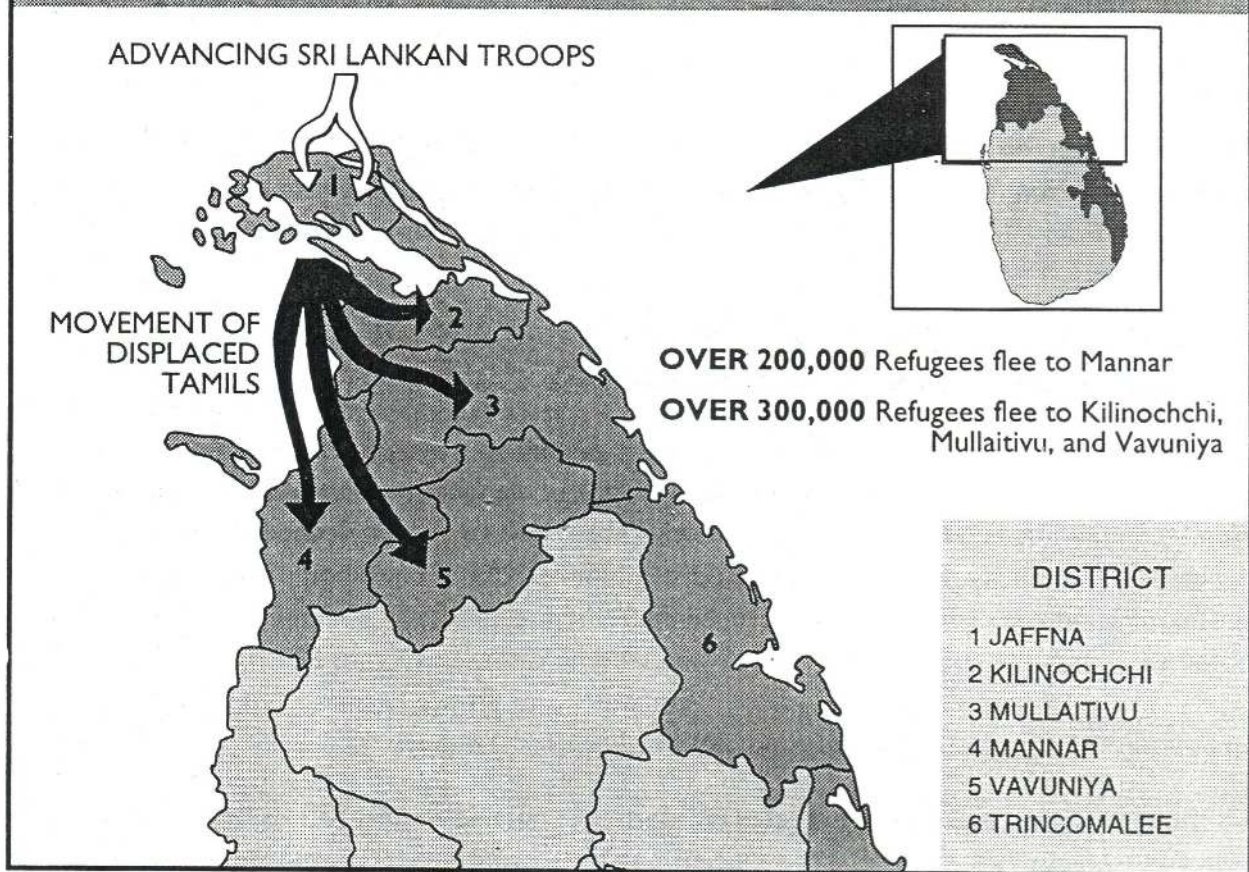
The smaller handbill gave the main points of the political package in Tamil and invited the Tamils to cooperate in the implementation of those proposals. This was of least interest to the majority of Northern Tamils living on that dark prison-peninsula in their refugee camps and shivering with fear about an imminent attack.

But the larger handbill, with a good coloured picture of the President, was a letter of the President, addressed specifically to the civilians of Jaffna, with the clear exclusion of their de facto leadership - the LTTE. It was again an attempt to wean a people from its protective and defensive leadership. It was to a people for whom she promised a few months ago 'peace and no more war'.

Hence she tried to speak here even of this destructive war as a war made for peace. Apologetically she spoke of 'a war thrust on her'. And finally she told the Tamils shivering with fear that this war was not against the Tamils, but against the LTTE and so on.

Was the Presidents message a last minute effort to quieten her own conscience against the atrocities committed in that massive and murderous plan to take over

TAMILS DISPLACED BY ADVANCING SRI LANKAN ARMY



Jaffna? Probably so.

The Paris educated lady knew only too well how densely populated the Jaffna town was.

She knew of the waves of displacements which have made Jaffna already a congested town. She knew that it was a town made into a dark prison without the facilities of electricity, transport, communication etc.

She knew the desperate situation of a congested town population eating the bare minimum and languishing on the borders of death and destruction. She also knew the anguish and agony of the increase in number of orphans and widows as a consequence of the twelve years of war. But all these were drowned in her love of power, loyalty to the chauvinistic ideals of her race and above all by her rage against the de facto Jaffna leadership.

Capture of Jaffna

Yes, capturing Jaffna was the target of the final military operation. The proclaimed intention of the government for this 'War for Peace' was proclaimed to the world as the wiping out or weakening of the Tigers, as the liberation of the people of Jaffna and Jaffna itself from 'the clutches of the LTTE'.

But that intention apparently suffered defeat and gave way to an imperialistic intention of the majority Sinhala, namely, to be rulers of a subjugated Tamil minority.

The intention of the Government was to break the backbone of the Tamils, destroy the fortress of the Tigers and strengthen the political image of the Government in the South as the saviours of the whole country and its majority race.

Chandrika may have yielded to a strategy of winning over the Sinhala chauvinists to

support her political package by establishing a triumphant and imperialistic victory over Jaffna. But it has turned out to be a costly experience for her from both sides of the divide.

The chauvinists who have once tasted a power victory by the hoisting of the Sinhala-flag-over-Jaffna, do not want now any power-sharing with the Tamils.

They are clamouring for one centralised powerful Sinhala government. And on the other side, the consequent exodus of the Tamils from Jaffna has resulted in the army falling into its own ditch. When they will liberate themselves from their own imprisonment is an open question.

The subsequent events in the country point towards an imperialistic blunder! A mobile guerrilla group, everyone knows, has no permanent fortress; it has many makeshift bases for existence and combating.

But the LTTE, besides its military defences against the Sri Lankan Army, has actively fostered, especially during the last five years, the growth in consciousness about the Tamils as a nation and a people with a distinct history and culture.

They have established substructures like the police, courts, transport, administration of all social activities and made Jaffna the historical and cultural centre of Tamil Eelam.

For the Tamils of Sri Lanka, and even for all the Tamils of the world over, Jaffna was not a mere region or a town. It was much more and in recent times has become a title for a whole nation and a history.

The Sri Lankan Governments have all along rejected and denied all democratic demands of Tamils in parliament for three decades (1949/1977).

They have militarily suppressed all democratic opposition, and later, unable to face up to the just claims of the Tamils articulated by the LTTE for recognition of their nationhood, homeland, culture etc., have ended up in capturing Jaffna the heart of Tamil Ealam.

After chasing away its people they had planted their Sri Lankan flag, an unloved and controversial Lion Flag for the Tamils

to continue their militarily oppressive rule as if over the tombs of the Tamils. Under the guise of fighting terrorism, the Government has clearly articulated its plan to subjugate the Tamil nation! If this is not the neo-imperialism of the Sinhala Government, then what is it?

Last Days of Jaffna

Operation Riviresa, the final for the take over of Jaffna, commenced on October 17, 1995 under a cloudy weather with signs of imminent monsoonal showers. Day and night it thundered, shuddered and people trembled and shivered.

The whole peninsula was vibrating day and night with the tremors of aerial bombs and shells, which were directed to scare and drive away the people from the approaching State Forces. Hence they were falling far beyond the combatant area of Atchuvvely, Neervely and Kopay into the densely populated Jaffna town.

How could the population survive such an aerial attack and wait for their "liberators"?

Having learnt many useful lessons from the experiences of the IPKF in taking over Jaffna against the LTTE of 1987, this Operation by the Sri Lankan Forces started after many weeks of intense military planning and preparation (very probably with the help and cooperation of the Indian Forces who already had a good geographical knowledge of the Jaffna terrain).

The approaching sounds and tremors sent a cold and frightening message into the heart of the Jaffna population, that was fast becoming a dense dungeon overflowing with three waves of refugees from the peripheral villages.

The message was fatal. It read:- The Sri Lankan Army is poised for a destructive but definitive take-over of Jaffna!

In short, with nearly forty thousand troops and tanks and modern weapons of destruction surrounding them, the population of Jaffna, shrunk with fear and hopelessness, was summoning utmost courage to face the ordeal of a final encounter.

If the intended take-over was to be a direct confrontation on land, then the people

could have to some extent relied on the defensive and protective strength of the LTTE.

But the Army movement towards Jaffna was, preceded for many miles ahead by indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombing.

The State Forces "coming to liberate Jaffna and the Tamils from the clutches of the LTTE" were not approaching them with a bouquet of suthu nelum (white lotus) for the people of Jaffna, but with a rain of lethal weapons over them. The world has still to learn from the Sri Lanka Forces how to liberate a people by showering lethal weapons on them!

Flight from State Forces

The Sri Lankan Government may have succeeded in convincing the world that this war was a war for peace and not a war against the Tamils, but the people of the North knew by bitter experience of forty years of death and destruction what the State Forces were up to.

Day by day they followed the advancement of the Riviresa and on the eve of October 30, 1995, the warning was made and it was a necessary one:

The State Forces are approaching the town of Jaffna and the Tigers will fight tooth and nail to defend it. It is advisable to move to safer areas of Thenmaraadchy.

This was enough to move a whole population into a panic-stricken exodus. There were no forcing or threats from the LTTE as made out by some anti-LTTE persons living far away from the North.

Surprised by the massive exodus from Jaffna, the Sinhalese and Tamil supporters of the Government, started shedding crocodile tears for the Tamils.

They first accused the LTTE of having forced the people out from Jaffna at gunpoint. Then they turned round in favour of the Government and said that the Armed Forces gave wise instructions to the people to move out of the war zone.

Naturally those who live away from Jaffna do not hear the shells nor see the bombs, they only see Tigers in Jaffna and do not hesitate to tell contradicting lies so as to discredit the LTTE.

When there is a fatal threat to life, it is the dangers to life and even help people to move out of the danger zone. This is what the LTTE did on the days around November 30, 1995.

It is true that this sudden exodus for safety caused much hardships, especially for the old and the sick, and deprived many of taking their belongings.

Because the Tigers were successful in delaying the army-advance near Kopay, the civilians were allowed, and even helped with vehicles in the case of transferring the sick and the aged to re-enter Jaffna and recover some essentials.

Many made use of the first week of November to re-enter Jaffna and collect a few more belongings while others were not able for a reasonable fear and high cost of transport.

A warning given to flee away from danger and a help given in the orderly and safe removal of certain belongings from Jaffna should not be mischievously construed as "forcing the people to flight at gun point".

Eye of the Needle!

The attempt of a few hundred thousand people with their belongings rushing to go through the one and only exit-bridge at Navatkuli was almost like the biblical camel attempting to go through the eye of a needle! But, thanks to the street discipline maintained by the LTTE Police Force, it went through!

With the coalescing of all the previous waves of displacements, the historic exodus from Jaffna, fleeing the threat of the Sri Lankan Army atrocities during that fateful night of October 30, 1995, alone reached an unbelievable 300,000 civilians.

The monsoonal rains were beating hard on their faces, sweat and tears could not be seen.

They were drenched, not so much by the night rains, but in the sorrows and pains of leaving their loved citadel of Jaffna.

They were like those rushing out of a house on fire, but not screaming in fear nor yelling in anger. It was a serious and sorrowful rush for survival, slowed down only by the massive size of the crowd and the bad roads.

The panic and fear-stricken population evacuating the city was forced to slow down as it approached the 6 feet narrow neck of the town the Navatkuli Bridge. Here they were literally trying to inch their way out of the danger zone. They were moving out, but the destiny was still undecided.

They had no choice between life and death.

For survival, they said, let us move out, as quickly as possible and with the maximum that we could carry in our hands, or on a cycle, or in a shared tractor or a kerosene van.

But once they passed out of the Navatkuli Bridge, a short sigh of relief, of having come beyond the dangerous zone, and the journey continued. The biggest question of survival was now "Where are we to seek shelter?"

While standing for hours in the rains in that long queue towards some unknown destiny in the Thenmaraadchy and Vadamaraadchy districts, babies cried for food and a drink, vehicles impatiently tooted their horns but all the others were deep in their silence of sadness.

Almost about 15 people of all ages in a row of bicycles or kerosene-powered motor cycles, each loaded with at least two bags of personal belongings on the carrier, an elderly mother, father or a baby on the bar or seat before the rider this was one pattern of travelling.

Another was with kerosene-oil powered tractors loaded with people as well as a variety of things, mats, pillows, kerosene oil lamps, cooking utensils, domestic pets, some food-stuff etc.

A third pattern was that of the wealthy and the aged-with an old A40 car running on kerosene filled with one or two families their belongings loaded in an open dicky and on the hood carrier. In between all these modes of transport, walked the poor with a few plastic bags of belongings and their little ones half naked and a goat or two all drenched in the rains.

Even this Inching out in the rains came to a grinding halt with every flat-tyred lorry or a heavily loaded tractor turning off the track. Between 5pm on Monday and 5am on Tuesday three babies had died through

stampede and a pregnant mother gave birth on the road. Hundreds of old people crossed the bridge but did not survive long.

There was not a single good hospital outside the Jaffna town to cater to the thousands who suffered.

Chavakachcheri and Manthikai hospitals were too small and ill-equipped to cater even to a few hundreds.

The pathetic exodus of the people carried the inhuman marks of the cruelty inflicted for a long time by many of the anti-Tamil measures taken by successive Governments, especially of the present one.

The inhuman economic embargo enforced by the government on the people, reduced them to primitive forms of life and the embargo on fuel and closure of the peninsula made all petrol fuelled vehicles disappear out of Jaffna-only kerosene fuelled motor cycles and old cars were available for transport.

Thus the last 13 years of war have shattered not only the general quality of the life of people, without communication and without transport but also reduced many of them to their skins and bones without the energy to do that long trek.

After the Exodus

Those who had some relatives or friends on this side of the Bridge made a beeline to those houses for refuge. But to each house in Thenmaraadchy and Vadamaraadchy came not just one relative or friend from Valigamam. There were several knocking the doors for help.

Those who rushed for help claimed different degrees of relationship and friendship with the hosts. Sri Lankans in general, and Jaffna Tamils in particular, cultivate an "enlarged family relationship" which includes third and fourth degree relations.

Further, unlike the distinction between a very small circle of friends and a larger circle of known people as in some Western countries, in Sri Lanka almost everyone, once met and shortly spoken to, is referred to as a friend. And in time of need, these wider relationships are very useful and made best use of.

Hence almost every house in Thenmaraadchy received guests without prior notice

and had to host at least five to six families of instant refugees.

Those who knew no one in these regions went to temples, churches and schools. In the temples and the churches, no place was too sacred to be reserved for the divine. Even the presbyteries (houses for priests) and convents (houses for religious nuns) were overflowing with priests and nuns respectively.

The poorest of the poor were still left on the roadside, under the trees, in old and dilapidated bus-stands and railway stations unused for almost a decade. (The Sri Lankan Railway and Transport Services have had no services in the North for over a decade).

Rehabilitation

A sudden and massive influx of refugees from the Valigamam urban area into the sandy suburban area of Thenmaraadchi with very limited facilities posed a huge human problem. Besides the inclement weather, the dewy nights, the food shortages, problems of sanitation, shelter, medicines etc. there was the absence of organisational structures to meet such a sudden and heavy demand. But with co-operation from all sides, the impossible ceased to be so.

It is to the credit of the LTTE that within two days their Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) with the assistance of the GAs, NGOs and religious organisations set up a network of services to cater to the very minimum needs of such a massive population:- cadjan sheds to protect the people from the rains, tube-wells at crowded centres, toilet-ditches, distribution of clothes, mats and sheets, dry rations and cooked food etc.

Without a single hospital with reasonable facilities like sufficient medicines, drugs, antibiotics, lab-facilities and operation theatre facilities, the biggest problem was the sanitary threat to the survival of the refugees. And that too was solved satisfactorily within a week.

Unashamedly, the government was unwilling to accept the reality of this mass exodus by giving false statistics to local and foreign media (only 100,000 displaced!).

They were reluctant to recognise the displaced as refugees because they have not crossed over the national borders. On this count it was even undermining the appeal made by the Secretary General of the United Nations for international help to aid the half a million "refugees".

Aid delayed was aid denied and thousands succumbed to the hunger, thirst, inclement weather, sickness etc.

The growing restrictions imposed by the Government on the flow of food, medicine and other essential items for life, the restrictions on the NGOs in not allowing their instruments of communication, the restriction on the media and prohibition of journalists to the North, and the continued attacks on the displaced population are causing the slow death of the Tamil population in exile.

Already three months have elapsed since the Military occupied Jaffna and chased out the population. The world has neither known the whole truth of this exodus and massive suffering nor has any Government condemned the action of the Sri Lankan Government for its military action.

The world is quick to condemn violence but reluctant to search out and treat the cause for violence.

