

Tigers end ceasefire

The Sri Lankan Army suffered heavy casualties in *Operation Agni Khiela I* (Rod of Fire), launched in Jaffna on 25 April, to capture the strategic Elephant Pass military base. Troops advanced in three columns on a frontline extending eight miles from Nagarkovil in the north-east to Kilali in the south through Eluthumadduval on the Jaffna-Kilinochchi road.

But within two miles the military faced fierce attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and was forced to retreat to the original positions. According to the government, over 260 soldiers were killed and 1,600 wounded. Sources say that a large number lost their limbs and the high casualties has affected the morale of the troops. The LTTE claim that only 70 Tigers died.

Operation Agni Khiela I came within hours of the end of LTTE's ceasefire at mid-night on 24 April. Earlier, the Tigers had announced they would not extend the ceasefire, accusing the government of failing to reciprocate. The LTTE also blamed the government of intensifying military operations during the ceasefire, killing 160 Tiger cadre and wounding 400. The Army claim that the LTTE violated its own ceasefire 220 times.

Encouraged by the Norwegians, the government and the LTTE, made positive contributions to the peace process in April. But observers are worried that the current fighting may damage peace prospects. NGOs have expressed concern over the failure of the international community to provide vigorous support to the Norwegian peace initiative.

Tiger political wing leader SP Thamilselvan stressed to the visiting Norwegian ambassador Jon Westborg in the Vanni on 6 April, the importance of both sides agreeing to a ceasefire. Mr Thamilselvan also told the ambassador that parity of status was vital and the LTTE will not participate in peace talks as a proscribed organisation. The Tigers were banned under Emergency regulations in January 1998, after an attack on the Buddhist holy site, the *Dalada*

The loss of life and terror experienced by the people of the war zone is a blight on the development of Sri Lanka. It can justifiably be seen as a reflection of the international community's lack of effort to support the Norwegian peace initiative.

Catholic Fund for Overseas Development
(CAFOD)

Maligawa in Kandy. During a meeting with Erik Solheim in London on 19 April, LTTE advisor Anton Balasingham reiterated that the Sri Lankan ban on the LTTE and the economic blockade of the north-east must be removed. Observers say that in the event of peace talks while the LTTE remains banned, the government may face court action for dealing with an illegal organisation.

The Tigers released from custody a soldier and two sailors, captured when they raided the passenger ferry *Iris Moana* in 1995 and refugee ship *Misen* in 1997. The LTTE say that the release was to encourage the Norwegian peace effort and to demonstrate their commitment to the peace process. The government declared a ceasefire for 72 hours during the *Sinhala Tamil New Year*, beginning at mid-night on 13 April. The government also announced that the ban on 25 commodities, including aspirin, eggs and fruit juice, into LTTE-controlled Vanni region would be removed.

In mid-April, the Defence Ministry made public a list of ten LTTE members in custody to be released. But lawyers point out that the Colombo Magistrates Court has already released two people in the list. In the case of five others, the Attorney General's Department has indicated that there is no evidence against them of LTTE links. Four are said to belong to EPRLF and TELO.

The two major political parties also continued to quarrel, without any prospect for cooperation. The main opposition United National party (UNP) attempted to defeat the government on the budget vote in Parliament on 11 April. It was reported that the UNP had canvassed several members of the ruling People's Alliance (PA) and had held secret talks with government allies, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). But President Chandrika ensured support by offering a deputy minister post to CWC MP M Sivalingam. The budget was accepted with a nine-vote majority and the 'rebellion' within the PA seemed to have vanished. But a split within the UNP was exposed, as senior members accused leader Ranil Wickremasinghe of double dealing.

Mr Wickremasinghe visited Norway on 12 April for discussions with Norwegian officials. A UNP statement says that he assured the Norwegians his party's full cooperation towards resolving the conflict, but had emphasized that any solution should preserve the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka.

Before leaving for Norway, Mr Wickremasinghe had indicated that the UNP would offer its support only if the government observes the bipartisan agreement brokered by former British Home Office minister Liam Fox. The 1997 Fox agreement requires the government to keep the opposition informed of all developments on the conflict.

Mr Wickremasinghe accused the government of not providing any information on talks with the LTTE relating to confidence-building measures. He has also indicated that UNP's support is dependent on the appointment of independent commissions on Elections, Finance, Police and Public Administration, which should be included in the government's constitutional reform proposals. The vital cooperation needed between the two parties for the amendment of the Constitution may yet prove to be a major obstacle on the road to peace.

THE NORTH

Humanitarian disaster

IN an article in the *Sunday Times* (London) on 15 April, journalist Marie Colvin says that the economic embargo by Colombo has created a huge but unreported humanitarian disaster for the 500,000 civilians, more than half of them internal refugees. She points out that Colombo prohibits international aid agencies distributing food in the region. Aid agencies estimate that 40% of the children in the Vanni are undernourished or malnourished.

Government ministers deny that there is an economic embargo on the Vanni, while checkpoints enforce a ban on items ranging from fuel, cement, and plastic sheeting to instant noodles and vegetable oil. Even sanitary towels are not allowed; they can presumably be used to dress wounds. The Vanni region, which covers 2,000 square miles, has no mains electricity or telephone service; its roads have deteriorated to dirt tracks. Most people travel by bicycle because of the fuel shortage. The day following the report, Marie Colvin was shot and injured in the Vanni.

After visiting the Vanni in late April, a delegation of southern Catholic Bishops also expressed concern over the plight of children. In early April, two children died in Mallavi hospital. A total of eight people died in the hospital in the previous month, where 12,192 people were treated, 1,108 for malaria. Reports say that 151 children died between 1997 and 2000 in Kilinochchi hospital.

The Sri Lankan Navy continued to intercept *Sea Tiger* supply vessels in the north-eastern sea. The Navy and the *Sea Tigers* clashed off Chalai in Mullaitivu District on 16 April. The Navy's three attack craft and two *Sea Tiger* vessels were damaged. Seven sailors were injured. In another clash on 21 April, six *Tigers* were killed and another eight were captured.

The LTTE's tough administration and rough justice in the Vanni continue to cause concern. In April, a Tiger court sentenced M Kamalanathan and Xavier Albert to death for murder and rape. LTTE's radio, the *Voice of the Tigers* announced that the sentence was carried out on 20 April.

In Jaffna, a number of young people went missing in April. In many earlier instances, missing people have been later found in military custody. The Army say that the LTTE is involved in recruitment of youth within Jaffna, after having suffered heavy casualties. Tamil group EPRLF has accused the LTTE of demanding taxes. The EPRLF says cooperative stores in Chankanai, Thirunelveli and Manipai, which supply food to refugees have been targeted.

The resumption in fighting in Jaffna is causing further misery to the people. Some civilians who returned to Thenmaratchy have been forced to flee north again to Vadamaratchy. Two people were killed by shells fired on Pooneryn from Thenmaratchy.

Arrest

Twenty eight people attempting to go to Italy, were arrested by Negombo police on 13 April in a ship. The police are looking for another 96 persons who escaped from the ship. They had each paid Rs 400,000 (\$4,545) to an agent. Reports say that 25 Sri Lankans were among 600 refugees who entered Italy on 22 April.

Fuel

The price of fuel in Sri Lanka rose by 12% in mid-April. The cost of kerosene increased from Rs 18.40 to Rs 19.40 a litre and diesel from Rs 24.50 to Rs 27.50. Fuel prices rose by nearly 13% last November.

Asylum

On 18 April, Australian police took into custody 24 Sri Lankans who entered the north-west coast. The refugees had arrived in an Indonesian ship. They were detained in a refugee centre at Port Hedland, 820 miles north-east of Perth.

Dispute

There is a demand in the north-east Indian state of Orissa for the removal of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, following an alleged assault on some local people. Over 1,000 cadre and family members of the Tamil group EPRLF, including former north-east Chief minister Varadaraja Perumal, were taken to Orissa when the Indian Peace Keeping Force left Sri Lanka in March 1990. Mr Perumal returned to the island in January 1999.

Sunday Times journalist shot

LONDON newspaper *Sunday Times* correspondent and award-winning journalist Marie Colvin was seriously wounded during a clash between the Army and the LTTE near Parayanalankulam, 20 miles west of Vavuniya town on 16 April. She was returning from LTTE-controlled Vanni in the night, escorted by Tiger cadre. According to Ms Colvin, she was kicked and harshly treated by soldiers after sustaining injuries, despite having identified herself as a foreign journalist.

Foreign and local journalists are forbidden to enter the north-east war zone without permission from the Defence Ministry. The ban remains in force for many years, mainly in order to prevent publicity about the plight of refugees. Ms

Colvin is one of only a few journalists who have witnessed the appalling conditions of refugees in the Vanni area. The Sri Lankan government has accused her of having a secret agenda with the LTTE. Six people, including M Seneviratne of Vavuniya, are in custody, blamed of assisting her to enter the Vanni.

Sri Lanka's Foreign Correspondents Association says that the government must have a more transparent and regularized policy of allowing journalists into rebel territory. In a letter to President Chandrika, Paris-based agency, Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) has reminded the government that journalists must be treated as non-combatants under the Geneva Conventions.

RSF said in April that A Farmi, the Mannar correspondent of Tamil journal *Thinakkural*, has received death threats after reporting the rape of two Tamil women by security forces in March. RSF has also written to the President over the serious deficiencies in police investigation into the killing of Mylvaganam Nimalarajan and the apparent unwillingness of the government to shed light on the Jaffna journalist's murder in October 2000.

Another Jaffna journalist Subramaniam Thiruchelvam, arrested in Colombo in January, accused of LTTE links, was released in late March. Lawyers say he was kept handcuffed and assaulted during detention.

■ LTTE abduct Muslims for ransom

Unprovoked attacks

EIGHT civilians, including two year-old Kunchithamby Sulakshan, were seriously wounded by shells from the Army headquarters in Batticaloa town on 28 April. The Army fired the shells on Thandiady and Mandabathady in LTTE-controlled Manmunai West area. Three houses were destroyed and 15 were damaged.

Batticaloa MP Pararajasingham Joseph condemned the unprovoked attack on civilians. A day earlier, following a clash in Valaichenai town, in which a Tiger and a soldier died, the Army shelled Oddamavady, damaging houses and injuring three women.

The security forces conducted a cordon and search operation on 23 April at Kannakipuram and Vinayagapuram in

Valaichenai area and interrogated a number of people. A day earlier, the Army checkpoint at Mylankarachchai on Valaichenai-Nasivantivu road was burned by suspected LTTE cadre. Following the incident, soldiers assaulted civilians at Mylankarachchai village and forced them to rebuild the checkpoint.

The people in the east have no respite, as the government continues to reject the ceasefire offer of the LTTE. On 2 April, eight Tamils from Alankulam in Batticaloa District, who went into Sinhapura in Polonnaruwa District to collect firewood were arrested by the Army. The military launched an operation on 9 April and advanced west into LTTE-controlled areas from Kiran and Valaichenai.

This was preceded by shelling of the area from Valaichenai Army camp. Hundreds of people fled from Perillaveli and Kudumbimalai to Thihilivattai and Sithandy. The security forces continued to shell LTTE areas. In late April, the Army again announced an impending attack and asked people to move from a 4 km area around LTTE camps, causing further displacement.

Two Muslims were abducted on 24 April near an Army camp in Valaichenai. Local people say Tiger cadre who arrived in a boat near Nasivantivu were responsible for the abduction. Eastern Muslim agencies say that the LTTE continues to abduct Muslims for ransom and have warned that this may further affect the relationship between the Tamil and Muslim communities. Tamil newspaper *Virakesari* says that the LTTE executed S Thillainayagam of Thikkodai in late April for the murder of his father-in-law. He was shot dead in public at the Thikkodai junction.

Further south in Amparai District, the police Special Task Force (STF) arrested Selvarasa Thevathasan and Sellathamby Selvarajasingham on 9 April at Thirukovil. Both had obtained employment in the Middle-East and were scheduled to leave shortly.

In Trincomalee District, two people were arrested in Muthur town during a cordon and search operation on 8 April. The Navy fired shells on Soodaikudah village in Muthur on *New Year Day*, 14 April, damaging four boats and a house.

State failure

THE Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) accused the Sri Lankan government in April of failing to take adequate measures on disappearances and has called for the appointment of an international tribunal. The government has failed to repeal or amend the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) as recommended by the UN Human Rights Committee. The powers granted to security forces under the PTA and Emergency regulations vastly contribute to disappearances. The government has also refused to properly investigate disappearances that took place after it came to power in 1994. Government employee and Amparai resident Kandiah Yoganayagam was arrested by police Special Task Force (STF) in June 1990. But later the STF denied his arrest. Following a fundamental rights application, the Supreme Court awarded Rs 100,000 (\$1,130) in January 2001 and the Army paid the money to his parents on 5 April.

The Vavuniya court ordered security forces in early April to submit explanations, following complaints that many detainees had suffered torture in custody. It is alleged that T Sathan of Marambaikulam, arrested on 5 March, had been tortured by police. Four people released by Vavuniya court in early April allege that they were hung by the legs and attacked with batons. Their heads were covered with plastic bags dipped in petrol and their bodies were cut with blades. Batticaloa resident S Thavarasa, arrested in December 1999, suffered severe torture at the STF camp in Karaitivu. He was cut with sharp instruments and burned with cigarettes. Chilli powder was applied to his body and an iron rod was inserted into his rectum. His pregnant wife who came to see him was thrown into a cell and beaten by an officer. As a result of the attack she suffered miscarriage.

ON 9 April, the Mannar court ordered the arrest of three police officers suspected of involvement in the rape and torture of Sivamany Veerakone and Wijikala Nandakumar in March. The court rejected a police application to extend the detention of the women and released them on bail. In an identification parade on 23 April, the women picked out four men who committed rape.

As demonstrations were held in many parts of the island throughout April, a number of human rights agencies, including Amnesty International, wrote to President Chandrika urging immediate action against the offenders. In late April, the three policemen and the naval officer were taken into custody.

Arrest

Reports say that eight security force personnel attempted molest women at Korakallimadu village near Valaichenai in Batticaloa District on 8 April. They had also assaulted ten men in the village who attempted to save the women.

In early April, the Supreme Court ordered the release of Yogendran Vijitha who had suffered severe sexual torture at Negombo police station. As the Judicial Medical Officer confirms torture, the Attorney General's Department has indicated that it will not represent the accused policemen. Widow M Nageswary of Navatkudah in Batticaloa was admitted to hospital after policemen attacked her on 21 April at her home for refusing to go into a room with them.

Tamil rice mill workers ordered to leave Polonnaruwa

Assault on detainees

DETAINEES on hunger strike in Negombo prison against detention without bail under the Immigrants and Emigrants Act, were brutally beaten by prison guards on 7 April. Fifteen detainees were injured, seven of them seriously.

More than 150 people are currently detained without bail under the Act for trying to leave the island illegally. The detainees allege that attempts are being made to transfer them to other prisons and have demanded a visit from the ICRC. Reports say that a detainee attempted to commit suicide.

Meanwhile, the Prisons Commissioner urged the Attorney General in early April to take urgent action to file cases against those held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and Emergency regulations or release them on bail. Over 1,200 Tamils are said to be in detention under these laws without trial, many for over two years.

According to human rights agencies,

small-scale arrests of Tamils continue. Areas between Colombo's Bambalapitiya and Dehiwala suburbs were searched in late April. Many Tamils in Kotahena and Slave Island say that men posing as officers of the Housing Authority had photographed them at their homes in late April. The Housing Authority has denied sending any officers.

The police say that *Black Tiger* suicide cadre continue to infiltrate southern areas, seeking high profile targets. A bomb near the President's House in Colombo Fort commercial district on 26 April injured a policeman. Two security officers working in private firms nearby have been taken into custody.

The opposition United National Party cancelled meetings in Anuradhapura on 7 and 8 April, after the police Terrorist Investigation Division informed that a woman arrested in Trincomalee had revealed she had been assigned by the LTTE to assassinate party leader Ranil Wickremasinghe.

Concern remains over the lack of measures to prevent torture in custody. Jaffna resident Sabaratnam Vaseekaran, arrested in August 1999 in connection with the murder of MP Neelan Tiruchelvam, was released by the Colombo High Court in early April. He had suffered torture at the hands of police and a confession had been extracted.

The Colombo High Court released Batticaloa resident P Vijayakumar on 6 April. Mr Vijayakumar was arrested at Hunupitiya near Colombo in September 1999. The Judicial Medical Officer confirms his torture in custody. A confession had also been extracted from him.

Provincial councillor M Sivagnanam says that Tamils in Rattota are being forced to submit photographs for police registration. In Polonnaruwa District, police ordered rice mills not to employ Tamils 'unless they can establish that they are not LTTE members'. Hundreds of workers from Batticaloa and the Hill Country have been ordered to leave.

Mawanella Muslims face violence

ETHNIC violence in early May led to three deaths and widespread destruction in Muslim-dominated Mawanella, 46 miles north-east of Colombo. Violence was triggered when a Muslim businessman refused to pay *kapang* (protection money) to a Sinhalese gang on 1 May.

Attacks spread to other parts of the town, the Muslims attempted to stage a protest the following day, demanding police action. The Police fired on the protesters killing a Muslim. Following these incidents curfew was imposed in the area. But destruction of Muslim property continued during curfew hours.

Mobs killed two other Muslims. Reports say 127 shops, 37 houses and 156 vehicles, almost all belonging to Muslims, were destroyed. Three factories were burned and three mosques were damaged. Initial estimate suggest that the damage may be in the region of Rs 300 million (\$3.4 million).

Labour minister Alavi Moulana has accused the police of failing to take proper action. Police failure has been due to political patronage enjoyed by the offenders, sources say. Muslim groups

have demanded action against Rural Industrial Development minister Maheepala Herath, who is alleged to be behind the protection racket. Local people also allege that Sinhala Weeravidhana and political party Sihala

Urumaya had been involved in a campaign of incitement against the Muslims.

In Colombo, Muslim civilians inspired by the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF) staged a protest before the Maradana railway station. The police tear-gassed and attacked the demonstrators. In the violence that ensued, five policemen and 20 Muslims were injured. The police arrested 23 people, including MULF leader Mujibur Rahuman.

The government imposed a 12-hour curfew in the capital from 6pm on 4 May. A ministerial committee, headed by the President, will plan reconciliation measures. The committee includes Media minister Anura Yapa, who had dismissed the violence in Mawanella as a minor issue. The Human Rights Commission is conducting its own investigation.

Government ally, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) says that the attacks were pre-meditated, to destroy the economic base of the Muslim people and has warned that it may review its position in the government. The SLMC has demanded the appointment of a presidential commission of enquiry.

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