

Tamil civilians flee from their Tiger 'protectors' as Sri Lanka war worsens

Civilians are fleeing from the Tamil Tiger forces who claim to protect them and revealing the fears of the thousands still trapped by desperate last-ditch fighting.



Sri Lankan soldiers are closing in on the Tamil Tigers Photo: EPA

By Nick Meo in Killinochi

9:30AM GMT 20 Mar 2009

The haunted eyes of the grandfather who had just escaped from the Tigers at their most furious betrayed the horror he had left behind him. "I want to live, not die, and that's why I have come here with my family," he said.

The exhausted businessman was safe in a Sri Lankan Army base after enduring weeks of terrible stress - trapped among 150,000 other civilians on a seven square mile strip of land on Sri Lanka's north-east coast, short of food and fresh water and incessantly pounded by shells.

The fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who for the last 26 years have claimed to be fighting to protect Sri Lanka's Tamil ethnic minority, have forbidden the refugees to leave - on pain of death.

But as the long civil war grinds slowly towards its end with the Tigers apparently facing final defeat, conditions within their enclave have become so grim that in the last week alone an estimated 5,000 people - men, women and terrified children - have risked their lives to flee. Many have been shot by rebel gunmen and some of those caught have been executed.

The elderly man, wearing a grimy T-shirt and sarong and clutching a single bag that he said contained all that remained of his worldly possessions, had managed to get out that morning.

He described how he had gathered his family and friends, as quietly as possible in the dead of night, before slipping past guards. They had been wading across a muddy lagoon towards Sri Lankan army lines when things went wrong.

"We left at 2am today in a group of 23 but the Tigers fired at us and only 12 of us arrived here," he told *The Sunday Telegraph* as his bewildered granddaughter, aged seven, looked on. "I do not know what has happened to the rest. We became separated in the confusion."

The survivors were now sheltering in the northern town of Killinochi, once the Tigers' capital. The Sunday Telegraph was told the man's real name, but is not publishing it in case it exposes him to revenge attacks. What he had to say about the Tigers would have been unthinkable for a subject of their dictatorial mini-state a few weeks ago.

"The people do not like the Tigers any more," he said angrily. "They are trapped by them and they are scared. They want the Sri Lankan Army to rescue them."

At their peak, early this decade, the Tigers controlled almost one third of Sri Lanka's territory - governing it with an iron hand while neglecting to develop its economy, spend money on schools or provide medical care. Much of the money which poured in from sympathisers abroad to support the "liberation" cause was creamed off by corrupt leaders.

Three years ago the island's government launched a tough offensive which has steadily driven the rebels from almost all the territory they held in the north and east. Now the Sri Lankan army believes that the Tigers are finished militarily. All that stands between them and defeat is their ruthlessness in using trapped civilians as a human shield.

The Sunday Telegraph was the first British newspaper to visit the Tigers' former capital since it fell in January, flying in by helicopter which skimmed low over the jungle canopy as the door gunner scoured below for guerrillas.

The previous day two anti-aircraft missiles had been fired by the Tigers. "Don't worry, they didn't hit anything," the army escort said with a grin. "They never do."

One of the architects of the Sri Lankan victory is Brigadier Shavendra Silva, a commander whose proudest boast is that his 58 Division has killed more than 5,000 Tigers since it began its bloody push north in 2006. He said the rebels could let all the civilians go free if they wanted to.

"They were forcibly taken," he said. "That's the only weapon that the LTTE has left. They wanted human shields so we could not bomb them, and they needed a pool of recruits so they could keep on fighting."

Young Tiger fighters who have been captured alive have terrible stories to tell of the life they led within the enclave. Sennappu, a 25-year-old teacher, was forcibly recruited and sent into battle after just a month of weapons training with the Tigers' standard kit: an AK-47 for fighting, and a cyanide capsule in case of capture.

Assigned to a bunker in command of six younger women, she couldn't hold out for long and when they were surrounded two of her comrades decided to blow themselves up with a hand grenade. She begged them to surrender as shells exploded around them.

"Mathuvanthi, who was 23, really believed in the Tamil Tigers' cause. She preferred death to surrender," Sennappu said. "Nalliessa, who was 18 and had not long passed her O-levels, had been told she would be tortured if she fell into the hands of our enemies in the Sri Lanka Army. She killed herself because she was terrified of capture."

Sennappu is now safe, but fears that her friends and relatives may well have been press-ganged as the Tigers' position becomes ever more desperate. In recent weeks gangs of Tiger gunmen have been roaming civilian camps under their control, at first taking one recruit from each family and then grabbing anyone over 14, putting a gun in their hands and forcing them to the frontline - where their life expectancy can be measured in days, or sometimes hours.

Fears are growing that the Tigers want mass civilian casualties, forbidding the refugees from leaving so they are killed by army shelling. Sri Lanka's president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, appealed yesterday for the separatists to lay down their arms, to ensure the safety of the trapped civilians.

Another frightening scenario is a mass suicide: tiger cadres are ordered not to be captured alive, and they may be willing to force their families and neighbours to die with them.

The intensity of the battle is clear in what the Sri Lankan army calls the "liberated zone". Surrounding paddy fields and jungle, with patches of burnt and blackened trees marking bunkers where Tigers had fought to the death, were devoid of farmers. There was nothing to be seen of the thousands of people who had lived in Killinochi, an empty, eerie ghost town now full of stray dogs and wandering goats.

Much of the population must have gone willingly with the Tigers. The group had fanatical support in the area and people feared the army.

Western nations and the United Nations have criticised the government's ruthless determination to continue the battle no matter the cost in human suffering. But aid workers and diplomats in Colombo

described how refugees were treated with kindness when they gave themselves up to soldiers.

Sergeant Sumeda Hettiarchchi, who was in transit in Killinochi returning to the front from ten days leave, said the fighting was the worst he had seen in 17 years service but worth it.

"Our morale is high and we want to finish it now," he said. "We feel very sad for the civilians who are trapped there. We want to help them, and the only way to do that is by finishing the LTTE."

Disease is spreading now as heavy rains lash the mass of refugees, who have no proper shelter and no sanitation.

Another 18-year-old schoolgirl who was forced to fight but managed to escape in February said she cried every day at the thought of old schoolfriends who were still caught in the battle. "They are only there because of fear of the Tamil Tiger commanders," she said. "They told us so many lies. The people will hate them after this."



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