

NEWS

NEWS FEATURES

INTERVIEWS

POLITICAL COLUMN

THIS IS MY NATION

MILITARY MATTERS

EDITORIAL

SPORTS

CARTOON

BUSINESS

EYE - FEATURES

LETTERS

EVENTS

SOUL - YOUTH MAG

KIDS - NATION

ENTERTAINMENT

NATION SPECIAL

Northern IDPs face humanitarian catastrophe

- Armed forces make rapid strides on west of A9
- Danger of chemical warfare looms
- India, int'l community maintain deafening silence

It appears that the LTTE, after offering stiff resistance, is slowly withdrawing from areas to the west of the A9. The Tigers are forcing the people also to move into areas east of the A9. This would result in areas to the west of the A9 being totally bereft of Tamils both civilians and Tigers. The north western sector of the Wanni would be populated solely by 'Sinhala' members of the armed forces. This would render them militarily vulnerable. They would be spread thin over a wide area, making them easy targets. The LTTE could unleash an 'unknown' calamity on the forces concentrated in that sector

The LTTE is yet to expose its full arsenal and the explosive potential in Prabhakaran's possession could be formidable. The LTTE's nascent Air Wing is now dormant. Again, its potential has not been fully realised. The Air Tiger capacity for wreaking destruction remains unknown and unrealised. There is also the danger of chemical warfare. Former LTTE Eastern Commander "Col." Karuna has warned of such a possibility. If only 'Sinhala' soldiers are physically present between the A9 and the sea on the north west, the environment could be conducive for chemical warfare depending on the direction of the wind

"Humanitarian catastrophe" was the description given by the so-called international media when the Caucasian conflict began displacing people.

Initially it was a humanitarian catastrophe only to Russian and other pro-Moscow media when 34,000 people became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) due to Georgia's military adventure.

Thereafter, when Moscow commenced military action and the IDP numbers touched six digits, the US and other Western media began focusing on what they termed as a humanitarian catastrophe.

There was a time (of idealist hope) when we of the developing world tried hard to establish a new information order as a forerunner to a new economic order. All hopes turned into dupes and the envisaged new 'orders' remain mirages.

Thus the Caucasian conflict with its underlying ramifications hogs the spotlight in a West-dominated, US-Euro centric media sphere.

Deafening silence

The IDP phenomenon in the Caucasus region receives much attention while equally or worse situations elsewhere in the world are virtually ignored, a case in point being the IDP crisis unfolding in the northern mainland of Sri Lanka known as the Wanni.

More than 150,000 people have been displaced, nearly half this number in the month of July alone. Yet there is scant mention of this ongoing tragedy in the global media. No reference to a "humanitarian catastrophe" here. We in Sri Lanka have been afflicted with this IDP tragedy for decades due to the ongoing war between the Sri Lankan Government armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Currently this brutal war is being waged in the Wanni. The arena of conflict is the territory that was/is under LTTE



Positional warfare is all about acquiring and retaining territory. Thus, media attention is focused on areas won and areas lost.

This excessive focus on military manoeuvres has resulted in the plight of the civilians being ignored, overlooked or marginalised.

Mainstream historical accounts regale us about who won or lost and how battles were fought but are silent on the experiences undergone by ordinary people during times of war.

Of course, there are attempts now to rectify this situation by those who subscribe to a subaltern perspective of history. Still it is to literature that we must turn to if we want to know and understand what happened to the civilian population in the past when war was conducted in the name of "state, nation and religion."

Civilian predicament

There is an African saying about how grasshoppers get crushed even when elephants frolic about in the grass making love. If tiny insects are killed during times of elephantine love-making, then what is their position when pachyderms make war?

Likewise, what is the position of the 'small people' when mighty military machines clash? This is what is happening in the Wannai now.

At one level the armed forces advance triumphantly with the LTTE retreating ignominiously. On another level there is a corresponding mass-movement of displaced civilians. There are both ecstasy and agony!

If the military triumph ascends upward to an ecstatic zenith, the civilian predicament descends downward to a nadir of agony.

The armed forces are making rapid strides on the west of the A9 Highway or Kandy-Jaffna Road. Advances are also being made in the east of the A9 in the Manal Aaru / Weli Oya sector.

The area of control enjoyed by the LTTE is steadily shrinking in size. Militarily this is a welcome development to Colombo. But there is another side to this. The 'captive' civilian population is also getting 'boxed in' with the LTTE. In a situation where the LTTE is inextricably intertwined with the civilian population like 'fish in an ocean,' the chances of civilians suffering collateral damage are very high.

The Tigers, on the other hand, are not known to be overly protective of civilians. While claiming to fight on their behalf, the LTTE has often callously exposed civilians to danger.

These incidents are then highlighted to seek sympathy from the Tamil diaspora and also for propaganda purposes against the government.

The government in turn adopts a two-fold approach. It accuses the LTTE of using civilians as a human shield. At times the government also denies these charges and points the finger at the LTTE saying this is part of Tiger misinformation and disinformation.

In recent times the government's response to problems faced by civilians is conditioned by a strong attitude of hostility.

Intolerance

The government opines that it is marching to victory over the LTTE. It suspects that there are forces planning to stop that march by pinpointing the civilian plight. So it is rather intolerant about representations made on behalf of civilians.

Attempts are being made to 'pooh-pooh' reports about the civilian predicament and describe efforts in that direction as Tiger propaganda. This, however, cannot obliterate the fact that civilians are getting displaced in large numbers and that an IDP crisis is unfolding in the Wannai.

With large regions of the Wannai being in perpetual flux, reliable, up-to-date IDP statistics are hard to come by. The UNCR website, for instance, has not updated figures after June 30.

Under these circumstances, the relatively latest and comparatively reliable figures are those released by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Sri Lanka Country Team (a collective of humanitarian organisations active in Sri Lanka).

In its latest situation report (No. 138) for the period July 31 to August 7, the IASC states that there are 112,019 IDPs from 27,562 families in Kilinochchi District; 31,080 persons from 8,917 families in Mullaitivu District; 8,054 persons from 2,696 families in Mannar District; 18,403 IDPs from 5,199 families in Vavuniya District; and 20,736 persons from 6,129 families in Jaffna District.

Of these, the Jaffna District IDPs and the bulk of Mannar-Vavuniya District IDPs are in government-controlled areas.

There is, however, a distinct attribute peculiar perhaps to those living in the Wannai. According to NGO personnel with work experience in the Wannai, almost all the people there have at some time or the other been displaced from their homes.

Many have been displaced on more than one occasion. Even those who have been residing in their own homes have been temporarily displaced at times. Likewise, many people who have lived in places for years as permanent residents were at one time IDPs.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that all civilians in LTTE-controlled Wannai have been IDPs at some time or the other.

There is also the fact that thousands of people displaced by war and the tsunami were classified as IDPs prior to the current upheaval. Thus we have a situation of 'old' and 'new' IDPs in the Wannai.

Another sad aspect about recent dispersals is that several places regarded as havens of stability in the past are being affected. Iluppaikkadavai, Vellankulam, Mulangaavil, Thunukkaai, Mallavi, Kanakarayankulam, Mullaitivu, etc., were places providing refuge to thousands of IDP families. Now the people from these places are also on the move.

Situation report

The IASC situation report figures are only an indicator of the magnitude of the crisis. There has been much displacement



The only silver lining in this dark cloud scenario seems to be the fact that most people had had enough time to move out from their homes.

As a result, many people were able to take away their important belongings as well as livestock and pets. This is a boon that has been denied to many IDPs in the past.

Still, the mass upheaval and inability of the authorities to address IDP needs quickly has deprived many of adequate shelter. Thousands are living in the open after constructing makeshift shelters.

Many converge near waterways and waterholes depending upon natural water for their needs. Firewood is collected from jungles and woods. Toilets are absent and cadjan fenced pits are used by women and the open spaces by men and children.

The problem about permanent housing and shelter is that no one is sure whether their current abodes are stable or safe. With the Army on the move and frontlines shifting rapidly, there is every chance that the people will be displaced again and again.

There is also the imperative need to provide dry rations and essentials to these IDPs. A substantial portion of these people were already classified as IDPs and were receiving aid. This distribution is now ruptured and needs to be restored to former levels as soon as possible. This does not mean that the aid received was ample or substantial.

IDPs are broadly divided into three categories and receive three types of relief assistance. One is provided by the Commissioner General of Essential Services (CGES); the other is provided by the World Food Programme (WFP), and the third are recipients of Samurdhi aid. The IDPs of the Wannu do not receive Samurdhi aid.

All people classified as having been displaced before August 2006 receive CGES assistance. All people displaced after August 2006 receive WFP aid. The IDP recipients are not given cash but only rations.

Assistance

The assistance provided by the government through CGES is woefully inadequate when compared to that given through WFP. The CGES provides assistance on a per capita basis. There is a ceiling of five for a family.

Thus, a family of five on CGES assistance will get items worth Rs. 1,260 for a month. These include 10 kilogrammes of rice, six kilogrammes of flour, four kilogrammes of sugar, four boxes of matches, five toothpowder packets and five coffees.

The WFP assistance, on the other hand, is much better than what the CGES provides, though leaving much to be desired. WFP assistance provided to each individual for a month is valued at Rs. 1,265. The dry rations given for an individual on a monthly basis are 5.6 kilogrammes rice, 5.6 kilogrammes flour, 0.56 kilogrammes sugar, 1.68 kilogrammes lentils and 0.56 litres coconut oil.

It is patently clear that an unjust anomaly exists even in the disbursement of inadequate assistance by the CGES and WFP. While the CGES gives only Rs. 1,260 worth of dry rations for a family of five per month (nothing beyond), the WFP provides an individual with Rs. 1,260 worth of items per month.

There is an urgent necessity to increase the quantum of aid provided by the CGES or bring all IDPs under the assistance of the WFP.

The government machinery in the Wannu is hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with humanitarian crises like the current upheaval. This was demonstrated during the tsunami.

One reason for this inadequacy is due to systematic neglect and step-motherly treatment by Colombo. These government departments have not been given adequate money or materials or equipment to handle such crises.

While many Tamils would point to these as further proof of how Tamil areas have been deliberately given step-motherly treatment, the government could justify its position on the basis that the LTTE would utilise enhanced facilities for their own use and not for the people's benefit.

Challenge facing NGOs

Against this backdrop, the challenge facing various aid organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) is the logistical difficulty of supplying essentials to the IDPs without delay.

What is happening is that international organisations and NGOs are finding it difficult to cater to IDP needs adequately and speedily because of governmental restrictions.

They are unable to provide food, medicine, temporary shelter, cooking utensils, sanitary, toilet and water facilities because of limited access. The halving of fuel requirements for NGOs in the Wannu by the government is cited as an example of such restrictions.

The government suspects that the LTTE gets a lot of help from some NGOs and fears that excess supply or unlimited access to the NGOs would only help the LTTE.

In fairness to the government, its misgiving about NGOs collaborating with the LTTE is not entirely unfounded. The government on more than one occasion has revealed details about how some NGO assets and materials have been utilised by the LTTE.

Nevertheless, it is the considered opinion of this column that the government must not place obstacles in the way of humanitarian organisations attempting to help the needy displaced.

The rights of the people cannot be subordinated to those of military necessity. The 'sins' of a few cannot be used as an excuse to penalise all NGOs and by extension the IDPs.

It is of the utmost importance that the government removes restrictions and enables humanitarian organisations to have adequate access (with perhaps greater vigilance) to the IDPs as quickly as possible.

Unless this is done, a gigantic crisis amounting to a humanitarian catastrophe could be in the making in the Wannu. The government may find it in the unenviable position of winning a militaristic battle and losing a humanitarian war.



yoke of the LTTE. The government position is that these civilians are an integral part of Sri Lanka and that its war against the LTTE is its own, internal matter.

But the problems caused by the military drive and restrictions placed on humanitarian organisations to help civilian victims run contrary to professed claims. The Tamil civilians are not being treated in practice as citizens of this country but as denizens of an alien, hostile nation. Therein lies the contradiction between professed objective and practical implementation as far as Colombo is concerned.

Terrible oppression

Kilinochchi's conduct towards the Tamil civilians has been callous and reprehensible.

The LTTE also claims to be waging war to liberate the Tamil people from Sinhala oppression. But in practice the Tigers have imposed terrible oppression on the Tamil people in the Wann.

Today the LTTE project of Tamil Eelam is in shambles and the Tamil people are facing a humanitarian catastrophe. The least that the Tigers could do is to let the suffering Tamil people depart to safer areas.

Instead, what the LTTE has been doing is to direct and drive the people further into the interior of Tiger-controlled areas. This process began when the LTTE forced the IDPs housed at Madhu Church premises to move out. Thereafter, the LTTE made sure that dispersals caused by military escalation did not result in displaced civilians moving into government-controlled areas. They were compelled to move further into LTTE areas; the notable exception being the people of Musali Division and some areas of Naanaattaa and Manthai West in Mannar District.

Presently the IDPs are moving into areas like Akkaraayan, Vannerikulam and Vannivilaankulam on the west of the A9 and to areas between Oddusuddan, Mulliyawalai and Puthukudiyiruppu, far away from government lines of control. This indicates that the LTTE intends using these helpless IDPs as some form of a human shield.

If sufficient pressure is mounted on Colombo by the Western nations and India to desist from endangering the civilians, then there is a remote possibility that a cessation of hostilities could be brought about.

This could help the tigers to freeze military positions at the current level and retain some territory. Having obtained a respite, the LTTE would be able to recoup losses and formulate fresh plans.

The government, however, is determined to pursue war relentlessly. The pursuit of war with the prospect of crushing the LTTE is the sustaining basis of this regime.

The conventional belief is that this single-minded motivation of the Rajapaksa regime is what sets it apart from previous regimes. Any perceived slowdown, therefore, could affect the very basis of its existence.

Civilian casualties

Thus, the government could disregard the 'human shield' deterrent and forge ahead with its military push. In that eventuality, there would be some civilian casualties and the LTTE would capitalise on that by deriving propaganda mileage.

It must be noted that civilian casualties have indeed been comparatively few in the fighting so far. Some civilians have been killed and some injured through aerial bombardment and artillery shelling.

The most notable among those sustaining injuries were Imelda Sukumar, the Mullaitivu District Government Agent and the spouse of Mullaitivu District Medical Officer Dr. M. Shanmugarajah.

The important thing is that there are practically no civilian casualties when troops advance into territory conquered after intense fighting. This is what happened in October 1987 during 'Operation Pawan,' when the Indian Army moved into Jaffna town.

This aspect of the fighting has not been lost sight of. Several cabinet ministers from Rohitha Bogollagama to Keheliya Rambukwella have proudly referred to the absence of civilian casualties when the armed forces capture territory.

This absence of civilian casualties is due to the absence of civilians themselves when the Army moves forward. Indirect notice of the Army's intentions is given by aerial bombardment and artillery shelling of a particular target region. The agitated civilians then move out of the area. The LTTE ensures that they move deep into Tiger territory. So the target area is virtually empty when the Army moves in. This strategy was practised successfully in the east. It is now being followed with some modification in the north.

However, the LTTE tactic of herding displaced civilians into particular regions and preventing them from moving out would be an impediment to military strategy. Since the LTTE would be enmeshed with the civilians and situate military installations amidst civilian dwellings, the security forces would face a catch 22 dilemma.

If they relax momentum on account of civilians and ease up on military pressure, the LTTE would be let off the hook. If, on the other hand, the armed forces bomb and shell regardless of the human shield, there could be massive loss of civilian life and limb.

Tamil Nadu tinderbox

This in turn would result in fostering a negative image of the armed forces and also could cause other effects. The tinderbox that is Tamil Nadu could be ignited at election time, leading to unintended and unforeseeable consequences. There may also be another dangerous reason for current LTTE behaviour. This column has consistently maintained that the LTTE is not a spent force and that the Tigers though 'down' are certainly not 'out.'

It appears that the LTTE, after offering stiff resistance, is slowly withdrawing from areas to the west of the A9. The Tigers are forcing the people also to move into areas east of the A9. This would result in areas to the west of the A9 being totally bereft of Tamils both civilians and Tigers.

The north western sector of the Wann would be populated solely by 'Sinhala' members of the armed forces. This would render them militarily vulnerable. They would be spread thin over a wide area, making them easy targets.

A variation of the earlier 'Oyatha Alaigal' or 'Ceaseless Waves' Operation could be on the cards. More importantly, the LTTE could unleash an 'unknown' calamity on the forces concentrated in that sector.



possibility. Karuna understands the mindset of Prabhakaran and Pottu Amman well. His pronouncements cannot and must not be dismissed lightly.

If only 'Sinhala' soldiers are physically present between the A9 and the sea on the north west, the environment could be conducive for chemical warfare depending on the direction of the wind.

Of course, the LTTE would be the world's 'pariah' and international repercussions could be terrible. There could be a massacre of Tamils in the south. But these would be of little consequence to Prabhakaran in matters of literal and metaphorical life and death. Besides, at the end of this human carnage and catastrophe, de facto partition may materialise.

These are but possibilities in the realm of speculation. Such fears may be proved liars. The only reality at present is the war that envelops the Wannu and aggravates civilian predicament.

Guiding principles

The UNHCR formulated some guiding principles to be followed in the case of IDPs. Though not legally binding, these 30 principles set out clearly the rights of affected IDPs and the obligations of host entities towards them.

They are too numerous and detailed to elaborate in a newspaper article but anyone reading them would discover that they are not being adopted as far as the Wannu displaced are concerned.

Both the government and LTTE, through acts of omission and commission, are flouting them flagrantly; some by the government, some by the LTTE and some by both. The end result is that of the IDPs being victimised further.

With escalating and intensifying fighting, there is no doubt that the conflict would get dirty, bloody and brutal in the near future. In that context, the humanitarian crisis of displaced persons could evolve into a humanitarian tragedy. What, then, is the alternative?

Given the prevailing politico-military realities, one cannot see Colombo calling off the war or even declaring a temporary ceasefire unless there is overwhelming external pressure or if a debilitating military blow is delivered internally.

Under these circumstances, the only humanitarian option seems to be that of creating an opportunity for the helpless IDP population to leave the theatre of war and seek refuge in government controlled areas.

Already more than 500 such persons have risked Tiger wrath and left LTTE areas clandestinely to seek safety in government controlled areas. Such people have been housed in two camps set up in Kalimottai and Sirukandal in mainland Mannar.

These people have been restricted right of movement and are kept in conditions amounting to detention. The government has been criticised by human rights organisations on this count.

What is essential therefore is to let IDPs from the Wannu safely reach government areas and then house them with dignity and decency. Many NGO personnel this column spoke to were confident that basic comfort and amenities could be provided to IDPs within two weeks of arrival.

They cite the eastern precedent of Vakaraai and Paduvaankarai, where nearly 200,000 IDPs were catered to within two to three weeks of arrival in government-controlled areas. In Batticaloa the LTTE allowed civilians to leave after the Tigers themselves decided to withdraw and relocate to the north. But in the north this is unlikely as the LTTE has nowhere to go.

Last bastion

The Wannu is the rear base and last bastion of the Tigers. Therefore, the LTTE is most likely to hold on to the civilians as some form of a human shield. In spite of this, the demand must be made of the LTTE that it should let the civilian population go if the people desire so.

Just as the government cannot deprive its civilian population of its rights and shirk its obligations towards the people on account of military exigencies, the Tigers too cannot oppress the Tamil civilian population for its own military imperatives.

There may be several Tamil civilians in the Wannu who would not want to seek refuge in government-controlled areas. These may be families of Tiger cadres and leaders, families of LTTE 'martyrs' and those who worked at LTTE institutions.

But there is also a very large segment that would prefer to leave the Wannu for reasons of safety and to get basic rights such as food, water, sleep and basic amenities. Such people should be allowed to leave the Wannu voluntarily by the LTTE.

The services of the ICRC and UNHCR should be enlisted and a human corridor set up for suffering IDPs to leave the Wannu. Partial and/or temporary ceasefires should be declared, observed and respected by both sides to facilitate such IDP movement.

The role of India and the international community is of crucial importance in this humanitarian enterprise. The conspicuous silence of the international community and India over civilian predicament is both appalling and perplexing. There is, however, a crying need for these actors to take the initiative in this regard. Only then can a humanitarian corridor be created and opportunity provided for IDPs to get out of the Wannu.

If such an opening for IDP movement out of LTTE-controlled Wannu is not created, the consequences could be horrible. With civilians getting crammed into limited and rapidly shrinking space on the one hand and an increasingly aggressive Army on the other, a tragic humanitarian catastrophe may be unavoidable.

[D.B.S. Jeyaraj can be reached at djeyaraj2005@yahoo.com](mailto:djeyaraj2005@yahoo.com)

<http://www.nation.lk:80/2008/08/17/newsfe1.htm>

Go

JUL **AUG** OCT

◀ 21 ▶

2007 **2008** 2010



[8 captures](#)

21 Aug 2008 - 17 Jan 2010

▼ About this capture