



Tamil Information Centre

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Committed to Human Rights and Community Development

Situation Update

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Sri Lanka: Internally displaced people in the east are not receiving adequate humanitarian aid

More than 80,000 people have been displaced in fighting following an offensive launched on 16 January 2007 in the Vaharai area of Batticaloa District by the Sri Lankan government forces against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Parliamentarians say that indiscriminate aerial bombardment and shelling, including the continuous use of multi-barrel rocket launchers, by the security forces in populated areas of Vaharai as well as Paduvankarai¹ area has resulted in the death of some 300 civilians. Over 1,000 others have sustained serious injuries. Homes, public buildings and temples have been damaged or destroyed. The total number of the IDPs in Batticaloa had reached nearly 160,000 by the end of March 2007. The number of IDPs in Amparai District has risen to more than 6,000 from around 2,400. In Trincomalee District, more than 2,800 people remain displaced (See Table), although many other Trincomalee residents are still in Batticaloa District. The government has blocked all access roads to LTTE-controlled Paduvankarai and humanitarian agencies are unable to reach the people who need assistance, particularly newly displaced persons still remaining in the area.

Humanitarian agencies are struggling to cope with the situation, mainly because of inadequate funding and restrictions on movement. The Sri Lankan authorities have returned IDPs to Vaharai after the area was captured by the security forces on 19 January 2007, without consulting UNHCR, despite the lack of safety and welfare facilities for the people returned. According to the Batticaloa District Secretariat, 16,654 persons were displaced from 12 *Grama Sevaka* (Village Headmen) Divisions of Vaharai in north Batticaloa. Of these persons, some 4,000 had been resettled by the government in Uriyankaddu, Vaharai North and Vaharai Central by 12 March 2007. There is grave concern over the government decision to resettle people without consultation, particularly in view of reports of abduction, torture and disappearances of Tamil people in the east, in which the security forces or paramilitary groups working with the security forces are involved. According to the local people, Sri Lankan army officers had threatened to cut humanitarian aid to anyone who refuses to resettle in Vaharai. Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe has accused the displaced people of refusing to resettle for the purpose of continuing to receive food aid. UNHCR said in mid-March that it has received government assurances that it will be fully consulted and engaged in any future returns to ensure voluntariness and safety. On 22 March 2007, UNHCR denied press reports that it had withdrawn from the Eastern Province.

As of 23 March 2007, only around 20% of the requirement for the Sri Lanka Common Humanitarian Action Plan for 2007 for the rehabilitation and resettlement of displaced people has either been committed or contributed. An appeal for \$66 million for 2007 was made by humanitarian agencies, including \$24 million for food \$12 million for shelter. UN and other agencies have appealed for urgent assistance from governments. With the new influx of IDPs, the pressure on the local population and

¹ Paduvankarai is the name for the area west of the Batticaloa lagoon. The area east of the lagoon is known as Eluvankarai.

humanitarian agencies has increased. Eastern Catholic Bishop Kingsley Swampillai has confirmed the position of local organizations that humanitarian aid provided to the displaced people in the region is inadequate. For example, the local authorities provided only 17 bags of rice for eight days between 10th and 17th March 2007 for 4,512 people in the Eruvil Kannaki Vidyalayam IDP camp. In several new welfare centres, the food was initially provided by the local people. The Bishop has appealed to the international community for assistance.

Of the 12,874 people displaced from the 42 *Grama Sevaka* Divisions of Muthur Divisional Secretary's Division² of Trincomalee District, who took refuge in Batticaloa District, 10,821 people have been resettled in 30 *Grama Sevaka* Divisions in Muthur as of 12 March 2007.

Although the government has failed to provide sufficient assistance, the local Muslim people in Batticaloa District have rallied to help the displaced Tamils arriving into government-controlled areas. In early March, the Mosques of Kattankudy and local Muslim organizations urged the Muslim people to assist the displaced Tamils and appealed for rice, sugar and milk food. A committee to coordinate the assistance was formed, cooked food was provided to Tamil refugees in welfare centres and a programme to issue dry rations was launched. The TIC welcomes the humanitarian effort by the Muslim people of Kattankudy and wishes to reiterate its position that local solidarity will pave the way for peace and community progress.

Main problems for civilians, including the IDPs

Food

Because of government restrictions, the prices of essential commodities have risen manifold, some even tenfold, compared to other areas. The World Food Programme (WFP) has provided food aid to some 60,000 IDPs in welfare centres in Batticaloa District through the Ministry of Nation Building and Development for the last few months. As the number of IDPs increase day by day, the food stocks are running low. The lack of food is badly affecting the vulnerable sections of the population such as the elderly, the disabled, widows, people traumatized by the war and the tsunami, and children. People have been pushed to sell their belongings and farm animals in order to buy food. The lack of milk food and other food is badly affecting the children and is having an impact on their health. Local organizations say that in some welfare centres only one meal (lunch) is provided and in others rice and lentils supplies are not fit for human consumption. In some places only rice and lentils are given whereas people in other centres also receive sugar and milk food. Some *Grama Sevakas* (Village Headmen) have pointed out about the insufficient quantity of food supplied to people in welfare centres to the Governor of the Eastern Province. But no action has been taken. A large number of people are living with friends or relatives. Many of them have received little assistance or no assistance.

In the IDP welfare centres, fuel and firewood are in short supply for cooking food. Furthermore, cooking for IDPs has become difficult because of the large numbers of people. Some refugee welfare centres wish to provide cooking utensils to the families, but utensils are in short supply.

Medicines

More than 40 refugees in four IDP camps at Kannaki Maha Vidyalayam, Moothathamby Vidyalayam, Saraswathy Vidyalayam and Avarthy Vairavar Vidyalayam in the Arayampathy were admitted to hospital in mid-March with disease. Spread of disease has been reported in other welfare centres. The number of IDPs has also created major water and sanitation problems and the situation is expected to become worse. Healthcare has become a huge problem as there is a lack of medicines or medicines are in short supply. The people in IDP camps as well as others who live in the open are vulnerable and need healthcare programmes. As a result of displacement of the people, hospitals in Mandapathady, Palukamam, Bakiella, Unnichchai and Kakkaddicholai are not functioning and vulnerable sections of the population are affected.

² Former Assistant Government Agent Divisions

Fuel

Only a fraction of the fuel needs have been supplied to the LTTE-controlled areas. Electricity is currently supplied only for limited hours and in some areas there is no electricity supply. This has affected businesses, banks, offices, industries and schools. Fuel is needed for machinery in agriculture, for fishing boats and vehicles transporting food and other essential commodities. The restriction on fuel has severely impacted in all livelihood activities.

Shelter

Many IDPs were accommodated by the local community and others were in schools or other buildings or in temporary shelters provided by humanitarian agencies. Of more than 155,000 people displaced in Batticaloa District, some 80,000 are accommodated by friends or relatives. The others are in 91 welfare centres or are living in the open. The unprecedented number of IDPs has placed an enormous pressure on the local community and shelter has become a major problem. There is not enough room in the established welfare centres or in the homes of people who are willing to provide accommodation. Many refugees have been accommodated in tents, but these lack basic facilities and recent rains in the district has made life in the tents difficult. Government restrictions on movement and on the transport of building materials have already had an adverse impact on the construction of shelters for war and tsunami victims.

Cultivation

Paddy (rice) and other cultivation have been affected by the fighting, displacement of the farmers and government restrictions. The 2006/2007 *Maha* (major) cultivation was badly hit by the fighting. Military operations had the effect of reducing opportunities for cultivation, thereby reducing food production. As shelling and air attacks intensified, most farmers in the LTTE-controlled Paduvankarai area were forced to flee without harvesting the *Maha* paddy crop. Nearly 90% of the paddy lands in Batticaloa District are in Paduvankarai. Local people say that the continuing fighting will not allow the *Yala* (lesser) cultivation and may result in acute food shortages in the District. Nearly 8,000 hectares (19,700 acres) of *Yala* cultivation lands in the District will be affected.

Rice is the staple food in the north-east. The cultivation of paddy and other food crops had been affected as a result of government restrictions on fertilisers and weedicides. Farmers have warned that they may have to abandon cultivation and the food production this year will drastically decline.

Fishing

In addition to government restrictions, the security forces have imposed restrictions on fishing in the north-east. In some places there is a total ban on fishing, but the fisher families have not been provided any assistance. Fishing is an important income-generating activity in the north-east and there are around 100,000 fishermen in the region. Many others are employed in the fishing industry. Where fishing is permitted, fishermen are allowed only up to a specified distance between 1 to 8 nautical miles from the shore.

Education

Education has been badly affected by the fighting in the Eastern Province and the displacement. Twenty nine schools in Batticaloa District are unable to function. Other schools in the District are providing education to the displaced students from Vaharai and other areas. The Kaluvankerni Vivekananda Vidyalayam is an example. This school is without much facilities and was struggling to cope, but now has been forced to provide education to 684 new students – 552 displaced recently from Vaharai and 132 displaced by the tsunami from Sithandy.

Children

More than 20,000 children are unable to attend school as a result of the recent displacement. School children in some areas have been ordered not to use bicycles, which are the main mode of transport for students. Bicycle spare parts are unavailable. Hundreds of thousands of children in the north-east have

been affected by the war, the tsunami and deliberate deprivation of essential needs by the Sri Lankan government. The children in the east, particularly in the Paduvankarai area, have been worst affected by the military operations, including aerial bombardment by the air force and the continuous use of multi-barrel rockets. Children are also the ones most affected by displacement, suffering from the scarcity of water and sanitation facilities, lack of adequate food and electricity and conditions too dangerous to attend school.

Other problems

Tsunami and war reconstruction work has almost come to a standstill because of restrictions on building materials such as cement. Supply of raw materials has been prevented by government which has drastically affected all small and large industries to the Tamil areas and in consequence employment of a large number of people. The lack of spare parts for vehicles is affecting transport of available food and other commodities to areas of need.

A military pass system has been introduced to leave the north-east areas, despite an earlier Supreme Court ruling that the pass system is illegal. Some roads are blocked by security forces and to leave and re-enter the road, residents must obtain a military pass.

The blocking of roads has prevented produce such as bananas, onions, grapes and tobacco in the Tamil areas being transported to the southern areas, thus affecting employment and livelihood. The checkpoints also prevented civilians from crossing into government controlled areas, keeping farmers from taking produce to markets. Animal feed has been restricted affecting farm animals. Milk production has dropped as a result.

Communication to these areas has become difficult, with government having restricted telephone lines and mobile phone contacts. Before the 16 January offensive was launched, the government cut-off all telephone connections to LTTE-controlled areas to block information about death and destruction.

Access

In Batticaloa District, six Divisional Secretary's Divisions - Vaharai³ in north Batticaloa, and the Paduvankarai areas of Kiran, Chenkalady, Vavunativu, Pattipalai and Porativu – were controlled by the LTTE. These form nearly 1,800 sq. km. (68%) of the total area of 2,633 sq. km. of Batticaloa District. More than 145,600 people belonging to some 32,560 families are residents of the Paduvankarai area. The entry points into LTTE-controlled area of Paduvankarai in Batticaloa District were closed on 12 August 2006. These are crossing points by boat at Kinnayady and Santhiveli, ferry services at Manmunai and Ambilanthurai, bridges at Kiran, Vavunathivu, Chenkalady and Paddiruppu and crossing points on roads at Kavathaimunai and Vaharai. Some entry points currently remain completely closed and limited traffic is allowed at the other points.

As a result of military activities and displacement, civil administration in the Paduvankarai area has almost come to a standstill. *Pradeshiya Sabha* (rural council) offices, education offices and Medical Health offices in Porativu, Pattipalai, Vavunativu and Kiran are not functioning. The situation has been made worse by restrictions imposed by the government on food, fuel, medicines and other essential needs to the LTTE-controlled areas of the East.

Many people are trapped in the fighting zones and are unable to leave. The Sri Lankan government has enforced controls on foreign aid workers and has ordered all local and foreign non-government organisations to obtain work permits for expatriate staff. It has denied access to conflict zones for humanitarian agencies. The government has also withdrawn visas issued to members of some international NGOs, alleging that they supported the LTTE. Some other NGOs have been forced to withdraw from some areas after the government accused them of acting against national security.

³ The Sri Lankan government announced that the security forces captured Vaharai on 19 January 2007.

The TIC urges that Sri Lankan government to -

- remove restrictions on the freedom of movement and restrictions on basic needs and essential materials for livelihood activities;
- refrain from forcing IDPs to resettle in areas that are unsafe, and where resettlement takes place, ensure that facilities such as shelter, food, water and healthcare are available;
- provide resettling persons assistance to begin livelihood activities;
- provide free access to all IDPs to national and international humanitarian agencies and remove all restrictions imposed on the agencies.

The TIC urges the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to -

- ensure that military operations are not launched in populated areas and civilians are protected at all times;
- end all hostilities and enter into negotiations to find a lasting solution to the conflict and to safely resettle all internally displaced people.

TABLE - 1
Internally Displaced People in the Eastern Province
As at 20 March 2007

Place of Refuge	Number of Families	Number of Persons
Batticalao District		
Koralaipattu North (Vaharai)	1,282	4,278
Manmunai South (Kaluvanchikudy)	8,190	34,080
Porativu (Vellaveli)	116	334
Eravur	10,513	40,563
Manmunai (Arayampathy)	5,569	21,569
Koralai Pattu (Valaichenai)	3,471	12,328
Manmunai North (Batticaloa Town)	8,462	30,090
Koralai Pattu Centre (Kiran)	79	302
Kattankudy	6	26
Oddamavadi	4	7
Koralai Pattu South	3,139	11,888
Total	40,831	155,465
Amparai District		
Addalachenai	12	53
Akkaraipatru	9	34
Alayadyvembu	239	811
Ninthavur	72	261
Kalmunai	486	1,917
Navithanveli	80	340
Sainthamaruthu	2	9
Thirukkivil	459	1,854

Karaitivu	143	553
Pothuvil	22	93
Samanthurai	48	166
Total	1,572	6,091
Trincomalee District		
Trincomalee Town	290	944
Muthur	239	760
Kinniya	269	806
Kuchchaveli	23	71
Morawewa	13	44
Thamabalagamam	78	215
Total	912	2,840
Grand Total	43,315	164,396

Source: UNHCR