



Tamil census ordered in Colombo

Sri Lanka's police have started registering thousands of people, nearly all ethnic Tamils, who have fled the war-torn north for the capital Colombo.

All those who arrived in the city in the last five years were ordered to attend special registration centres.

The government says the rebel Tamil Tigers are using the influx of people to infiltrate the city and plant bombs.

It comes as the latest military offensive against the separatist Tamil Tigers continues in northern Sri Lanka.

The registration was ordered for people who had arrived in Colombo and surrounding towns from five northern districts.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said those without what he called a valid reason to stay should leave the area.

The registration centres were set up in schools and temples across the capital city and surrounding towns.

Harassment complaints

The BBC's Roland Buerk in Colombo says the vast majority waiting in line are from the ethnic Tamil minority.

He says the impromptu census began as government forces pressed ahead with an offensive to crush the Tiger rebels in the north, and end their fight for a separate state for the Tamils.

He adds that Tamils have complained of harassment, frequent searches and arbitrary detentions amid heavy security.

One man waiting outside a school in the suburb of Wellawatte told our correspondent that Tamils were being singled out and the registration drive was a human tragedy.

The police said they were updating information in order to help those who had arrived in the city.

On Friday, fresh clashes were reported between Tamil rebels and government troops in northern Sri Lanka.

Earlier in the week, the UN and other aid groups pulled out of the area after the government said it could not guarantee their safety. About 250,000 people have been displaced by the fighting.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been fighting for a separate Tamil homeland in the north and east for 25 years.

Human rights groups say about 70,000 people have been killed in what is one of South Asia's longest-running and most persistent insurgencies.

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Mano 'rejected' Basil's request

The Sri Lanka government engaged in a systematic campaign to intimidate anti-war campaigners, a leading Tamil parliamentarian said.

Leader of the Western Peoples Front (WPF), Mano Ganeshan, made the accusation after he was questioned for nearly six hours by the anti-terror police in Colombo.

Speaking with BBC Sandeshaya after being questioned by Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) he said police focused on whether he maintained close links with the Tamil Tigers, a charge he categorically denied.

However, several parliamentarians of the ruling party approached him to "get the LTTE to boycott the presidential election held in 2005 November".

"I turned down the request made by Basil Rajapaksa and the late Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, saying that I don't have any shady deals with the LTTE," added parliamentarian Ganesan.

Mahinda Rajapaksa won the 2005 presidential election with a thin majority after Tamils in the north boycott the elections.

The main opposition and a breakaway faction of the ruling party accused Mr. Rajapaksa of offering Rs. millions for the LTTE to force Tamil people to boycott the elections.

The government denied the accusations but a parliamentary select committee was appointed to look into the allegations.

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Leave north, aid workers told

The Sri Lankan authorities say they ordered all foreign and local aid workers to leave LTTE-held Vanni.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa told BBC Sandeshaya that the government decided to urge the workers International and local Non Governmental Organisations (INGOs and NGOs) to leave Kilinochchi and surrounding areas.

"Currently nobody can do any development work in that area. So there's no reason for them to stay in Kilinochchi. The second reason was their security. When we ask the NGOs and INGOs that they cannot any longer stay there they have to completely withdraw and publicise their withdrawal" Mr. Rajapaksa said.

Muttur incident

The notice issued by the government says those already there should leave along with local staff who are not permanent residents of the area.

The government does not want to be accused of targeting aid workers "similar to what happened in Muttur", the Defence Secretary who is the younger brother of President Rajapaksa said.

He was referring to the murder in 2006 of seventeen local workers for the French charity Action Against Hunger in the eastern town of Muttur.

Nordic monitors blamed the military for the execution-style killings, the Government blamed the rebels.

"Now that we have given an adequate warning, as far as we are concerned aid workers are not there. We have told them to start withdrawing immediately and to let us know the progress," he told BBCSinhala.com.

The government decision comes as troops press forward with an offensive aimed at crushing the rebels and ending their fight for a separate state for the Tamil minority.

Aid agencies in the north have been helping the estimated one hundred and sixty thousand people in rebel areas who have been displaced by fighting.

The United Nations says as many as eighty five thousand have fled their homes since the start of June, ahead of a military advance.

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Displacement 'shatters lives'

The three day conference on the status of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) opened in Colombo on Tuesday is a great opportunity to focus on the future of the IDPs, a special UN envoy said.

Delivering the main speech, Prof. Walter Kalin, the Representative of UN Secretary General on human rights of IDPs said the conference is "timely, regardless of the present situation in Sri Lanka".

"Internal displacement shatters lives, and it takes long time to rebuild these lives," he told addressing over 100 foreign and local delegates taking part in the summit.

Prof. Kalin added: "General displacement means too often communities break apart. And the distress of the displacement and disperse; Something that often result in marginalisation".

The right of the IDPs to resettle in their original lands was introduced to the summit by the UN envoy.

Minister for Disaster Management and Human Rights, Mahinda Samarasinghe, who presides the conference, told BBC Sandeshaya that the event provides an ideal forum for interested parties to voice their concerns.

Security situation

Although the ministry is committed to implement the proposals of the summit, he said, the current security situation will have to be taken into consideration.

"We will have to get Defence Ministry involved. It might be difficult to implement some proposals due to the current situation however best they are," the minister told Elmo Fernando.

Many participants agreed that the conference offered a good opportunity to raise their concerns.

However, Executive Director of National Peace Council (NPC) Jehan Perera told BBC Sandeshaya that the ground reality was not discussed during the first day deliberations.

"The current situation in Kilinochchi; the fact that civilians are killed and displaced was not discussed. I think the summit will be a useful one if the current situation is also taken into consideration," he said.

'Pain' of Sri Lanka aid pullout

Fears of a humanitarian crisis are mounting in northern Sri Lanka as troops press ahead with an offensive to capture territory from Tamil rebels. A week ago the UN and other agencies pulled out of the area, where more than 200,000 people are displaced by fighting. Here one aid worker describes how hard it was to leave.

During my last weeks in Kilinochchi there was a foreboding sense of a massive army approaching from the south-west.

The escalating war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government was bringing fighting closer to the town. It led to a massive movement of civilians in the region, known as the Vanni.

I never heard gunfire or sounds of close-quarters fighting, instead day and night there were constant thuds and booms of artillery and rockets fired from multi-barrel launchers landing in the distance.

Day after day, the constant rumble of heavy artillery got closer and closer. Twenty-four hours a day my office, bedroom, kitchen and bunker would be shaking with the thumps of shells landing. The sensation of the approaching doom was all too real with this kind of warfare.

As an aid worker I had been struggling to provide greatly needed assistance to the ever increasing number of people who had been displaced by the fighting.

They had fled from the unbearable noise and fear of the approaching artillery - at first this was happening mostly in the south-western areas of the Vanni. With few transport facilities families couldn't go far, just a few tens of kilometres, before they sheltered under trees.

As the military advanced the shelling caught up with them and often they had to move again after a couple of days. Many of these areas to the south-west of the Vanni were out of bounds for us as aid workers because of the high danger. But as the military advanced further the people moving ahead of them came closer to Kilinochchi, and we began to meet them and hear their stories of multiple displacements.

I saw children shaking with fear and mothers trying to calm them while they themselves were shaking with fear

They were hungry, tired, afraid and traumatised. The children had not attended school for months, fathers had lost their means of making a living, such as fishing boats, nets and engines. Mothers were dealing with the raw emotion of just not being able to protect, feed and educate their families.

As aid workers we tried our best to provide shelter, water and sanitation facilities to the people; we built emergency camps in areas that we predicted would be safe havens for people to gather, but as the days went by and the army approached Kilinochchi, the distant rumble of artillery rapidly escalated into a constant roar of shells raining down, in and around

the town. Our own security was jeopardised and we were unable to continue to provide further assistance.

The security situation spiralled to emergency levels; artillery and air attacks on Kilinochchi became a frequent event. The Sri Lankan government had put pressure on us to leave as they could not ensure our safety any more in the town. We were 10 international staff there by that time and we had to begin the heartbreaking task of trying to close our offices and relocate to government-controlled areas.

Sheer panic

Emotions were very high through those days, we were dealing with the guilt and frustration of having to leave at the time when humanitarian assistance was needed the most by the community that we had all got to know and develop strong relationships with. Stopping our programmes was professionally hard, but our staff became the focal point of our emotional state.

The LTTE has a pass system for those who want to leave the Vanni for government areas. Many of our staff members were simply refused a pass for one reason or another.

The passes are granted to individuals, not families, so those who were granted one had a heartbreaking decision to make, whether to leave their spouse and children behind under a barrage of shells and air attacks to come with us to continue to work and earn money, or to stay behind with their family and face the possibility of being forced to join the LTTE and sent to fight.

To manage, advise and counsel our staff through this process was the hardest thing emotionally I and many of us had ever dealt with. As the roar of the shells got ever closer to Kilinochchi the urgency of the decision-making increased and staff had to begin to move to government areas, leaving their loved ones behind.

I remember one morning when an air attack happened very close to me. I managed to get into the bunker quickly and narrowly escaped being hurt. I will never forget the noise of that fighter jet, the unbelievable sound of the engine as it swooped from the sky and the explosions of the bombs dropped close by.

But the lasting image I have is of the sheer panic and traumatised people when I emerged. As aid agencies we have concrete fortified bunkers, but the population of Kilinochchi has muddy holes in the ground. I saw children shaking with fear and mothers trying to calm them while they themselves were shaking with fear.

We shared tears, we shared the feelings of terror and intense guilt, and we left

We were scheduled to leave Kilinochchi on Friday, 12 September but large-scale protests were held outside our compounds. The people were chanting "Don't Leave, Don't Leave".

The demonstrators were so polite and respectful to us. They were not angry, they were desperate. They understood that we needed to end our operations, and told us that they would manage themselves with shelter and water.

It was the prospect of our physical departure that terrified them. With no international presence and no witness to the conflict, they believed that many atrocities would occur and no one would see this.

For three days the protests continued. We all understood and felt their fear but our hands

were tied. The situation was becoming incredibly dangerous; some international aid workers had to leave their compounds and move to "safer areas" as artillery shells were landing within a few hundred metres of our compounds.

For the final two days in Kilinochchi we spent much time in our bunkers as the artillery and air attacks intensified in and around the town. The sound through these days was tremendous, everything would shake and the air implode as the shells landed. In the near distance we could hear the terrifying sound of helicopter gunships, firing rockets.

The residents of Kilinochchi town began to leave, moving further north, away from the approaching artillery. It was clear we would have to go too the following day or we would be stuck there.

Shame

On the morning of 16 September we lined our vehicles up at our compound and under heavy shelling and air attacks, wearing bullet-proof vests and helmets, we drove out of Kilinochchi town and headed for the government areas.

We left a number of our staff, who could not get passes, behind. We shared tears, we shared the feelings of terror and intense guilt, and we left.

I remember feeling deep shame as I drove past civilians who were watching me from the side of the road, in my ballistic vest, heading for safety, as they stood there in their trousers and shirts and saris. We drove through the site of a fresh air attack on the A9 road and once again saw the devastation it caused and understood what may come for Kilinochchi and its civilian population.

Although I appreciate and respect the security rules that govern aid workers and understand why we had to leave, I still have to deal with a great sense that I abandoned those people. There is the pain and guilt of saying goodbye and good luck to our staff who had worked so hard and with such passion for the victims of war in the Vanni - and leaving them behind.

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AI slams LTTE 'human shield'

The human rights group, Amnesty International, says Tamil Tiger rebels in Sri Lanka are breaking international law by using civilians as a buffer against government forces.

AI's researcher for Sri Lanka, Yolanda Foster, said there were cases where militants had forced people to stay in rebel-held areas, in an attempt to hamper army operations.

"The Tigers are keeping them in harm's way and the government is not doing enough to ensure they receive essential assistance," she said.

Govt. 'not doing enough'

Amnesty has accused both sides in Sri Lanka's long-running conflict of deliberately putting civilians at risk to pursue military objectives.

Nearly 70,000 people were displaced due to aerial bombardment and artillery attacks by government forces in Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, it said.

"In the absence of independent international monitors, Sri Lankan civilians lack protection and remain at the mercy of two forces with long records of abuse," Ms. Foster added.

The human rights group urged both parties to allow civilians to move to safer areas and to receive humanitarian assistance.

On Thursday, the International Committee of the Red Cross said tens of thousands of people had been displaced in recent fighting in northern Sri Lanka.

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Vatican denies state media report

Vatican has denied Sri Lanka state media reports in saying that it has commended the president for 'liberating' the sacred Madhu shrine in Mannar.

In a statement, handed to journalists in Colombo by opposition parliamentarian Jayalath Jayawardene on 22 September, the Vatican has denied Cardinal Francis Arinze making such a comment.

A state owned Daily news report published in the Sri Lankan defence ministry website quoted the visiting Vatican Cardinal Francis Arinsay as saying that "Catholics should be grateful to President for liberating Madhu".

"The entire Catholic community in Sri Lanka should be grateful to President Mahinda Rajapaksa for liberating the historic Madhu Shrine from the terrorists and restoring to the Church, Vatican Cardinal Francis Arinsay said when he called on the President at Temple Trees yesterday (Sep 16)," state owned Daily News has reported.

However, the Vatican in a statement issued on 20 September, has denied the Cardinal making any such statement UNP MP, Jayalath Jayawardene told the media.

"In his cordial discussion with the President, the Cardinal did not express himself on the Madhu issue at all nor on any other issue of a political nature," the statement issued by the Apostolic Nunciature in Sri Lanka stated.

"It is a disgrace that the official website of the Defence Ministry reports false, diabolical and malicious lies," parliamentarian Jayawardene said.

The shrine sacred to Catholics was in LTTE-held territory until advancing Sri Lanka troops captured the area in April, this year.

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No reports on Vanni food shortage-ICRC

The International Red Cross in Colombo (ICRC) says that there have not been reports on food supply shortages in the vanni where fighting has intensified between government security forces and the Tamil Tigers.

"The food supplies are there and we are constantly monitoring the situation" said Alexandra Matijevic spokesperson of the ICRC.

However she cautioned that health of the displaced could be a concern with the on coming monsoon rains.

Matijevic said that the ICRC has taken care of about 84,000 displaced in the areas affected by recent fighting.

"We have been supplying them with water, food and other essential supplies", Matijevic said.

Speaking on relief operations Alexandra Matijevic said that "The security of civilians and ICRC staff is a concern as the situation is extremely volatile in the Vanni"

She further added that the ICRC gets security guarantees on a day to day basis from government security forces as well as the Tamil Tigers and plan out relief work accordingly.

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Relief becomes a problem - Killinochchi GA

Civil authorities in the north say that in the providing essential relief to the displaced Killinochchi district has become difficult as fighting intensifies.

Government Agent Nagalingam Vedanayagam said that about twenty five thousand are displaced as civilians flee their villages fearing further fighting.

"Most of these people are from Iranamadu Junction, Murugandi and Arivial Nagar ," said Vedanayagam

Civilians who have fled their villages after artillery fire exchanges are taking refuge in Hindu tempals and schools while some have to live under trees said the GA to journalist Dinasena Rathugamage.

"Providing relief is becoming a problem because there are only about twenty five percent of the government officials in the area , " said Vedanayagam.

The GA said that many government officials have left the area after claymore bomb attacks while some others are reporting to offices away from Kilinochchi.

Relief agencies including the UN is leaving the area has worsened the problem according to the GA.

"These relief agencies provided cooked meals, transported the injured to the hospital, and put up tents for the displaced "said Vedayanaygam.

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Negombo Police blamed on murder

A person in two cases - torture and bribery - against police was murdered on Saturday in Negombo.

Anton Sugath Nishantha Fernando was a complainant in a torture case before the Supreme Court against several police officers attached to the Negombo Police Station and a bribery case in high court.

He was shot dead at Dalupotha junction, Negombo while driving his van accompanied by his 11 year old son.

Nishantha Fernando had repeatedly complained to police and all relevant authorities about the constant death threats but to no avail, says his wife S.S.Padmi Pieris.

"Negombo police is responsible for my husband's murder", she said.

Independent inquiry urged

In an interview to Sandeshaya she said she spoke to Inspector General of Police and requested for an independent inquiry and named a number of police officers whom she suspects.

The investigation into the case has now been transferred to the Palyagoda Police.

Headquarters inspector of the Negombo Police said Somasiri Liyanage dismissed allegations of police involvement in the murder.

When questioned why Nishantha Fernando was not given police protection Inspector Liyanage said the deceased requested protection only on the day of the crime.

"He never requested protection prior to this" said Inspector Liyanage

Threats

On the 23rd of June 2008 four men, believed to be hired by the police, arrived at his house and told him to withdraw the fundamental rights complaint currently pending before the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, stating that if within 24 hours he did not do so, he and his family would be assassinated, says The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)

AHRC states that the initial complaint of Nishantha Fernando was against police inspector Mahagama Dharmadasa for soliciting a bribe of 5,000 rupees (about 46 USD).

The Bribery Commission inquired into the matter and filed a prosecution before the High Court of Colombo,

"Following the arrest of policemen, about 12 police officers from Negombo attacked the whole family (wife and two children) and seriously injured them.

Inspector Liyanage said that there was never an attack on the family by the Police.

A case against twelve police officers of the Negombo Police regarding this assault is before the Supreme Court for its final hearing", states AHRC.