

NEWS

school, then they were taken by bus to the town of Vavuniya. She called her mother: "I said, Mum, just get me out of here, I just want to get out of this place. And the phone got cut off."

The Sri Lankan government has built a series of camps to house the estimated 300,000 people who poured out of the war zone. It claims that it needs to hold the civilians until it can weed out the former Tamil Tiger fighters; its critics, including many UN organisations and independent aid groups, question why, even if that is true, it needs to imprison children and the elderly behind barbed wire, and why it has not more quickly identified the rebels. Despite pledges to start sending the internees back to their homes "at the earliest possible opportunity", the UN says only 2,000 have so far been released.

There was no food the first day Gnanakumar arrived, and she had lost contact with the people she had been with. She slept in a tent with strangers.

Even after the privations of the war zone, conditions in the camp still came as a shock.

"Wherever you go there are big queues, whatever you want you have to queue. The toilets are terrible, I can't describe how disgusting. Flies everywhere, mosquitoes, unhygienic ... People had all sorts of illnesses.

"People have lost their family members, they are separated from their families ... and they are going through depression."

Accounts circulated of rapes and murders, of people disappearing. Some people committed suicide: a teacher was found hanging from a tree.

Military intelligence officers were roaming the camps, looking for former Tamil Tigers, she said. "It is an open prison, you are free to walk but you are inside a prison, you are not allowed to step out. You can't. There were guards everywhere and checkpoints."

A couple of days after she arrived, the British high commission made contact through the UNHCR. An appeal from her parents in the Guardian brought fresh hope and a flurry of activity: she was moved from the overcrowded zone two to zone one, the part of



the camp the authorities show to visitors.

"I was there when the UN secretary Ban Ki-moon came in ... He stayed there for about 10 minutes and just went. Why didn't he go into the camp and talk to the people and spend some time asking them what their problems were? I thought he has a responsibility and people were expecting something from him. They expected much from him and he just spent 10 minutes and that's it."

The officials told Gnanakumar she would be staying for a couple of days and would then be released. "And then the 48 hours turned into three days and then it turned into weeks and months and I thought OK, now I understand it

is not going to happen."

She was interrogated five times - what was she doing there? Why had she been in the hospitals?

The call to say she was going home came last week. She was taken to Colombo to meet the president's brother, Basil Rajapaksa.

"He said OK, you went through so much in the country and now you are released you can go and join your family and be happy. He wasn't sorry about it." She was then handed over to British officials.

She speaks in a matter-of-fact way, rarely betraying emotion. Her hair has been tied back tightly - she had beautiful hair before she left, she says, but lost most of

it in the camps. She is not sure what she will do now, maybe something in the field of medicine.

"I'm happy and proud of myself that I was able to help the people. I still think it is unreal that I am in the UK ... I never thought I would be alive and coming back, even in the camp.

"After looking at the people dying and dead bodies everywhere, it is like nothing threatens me any more, it is like I have had the hard time in my life and I think I am prepared to take up whatever happens in life now.

"I'm not that old Vany that sits down and cries for little things. I'm stronger now after going through and seeing all that prob-

lem. My mind is clear now."

The Sri Lankan high commissioner in London denied Gnanakumar's allegations and called the claim of more than 20,000 civilian deaths "unsubstantiated and fabricated". A spokesman said that at no time did it target "government hospitals or any other civilian infrastructure where the civilians were accommodated".

The spokesman said: "The government of Sri Lanka has all reasons to believe that Ms Gnanakumar has gone to Sri Lanka and worked in the conflict area according to the LTTE's agenda, while overstaying her visa." He said the government was "continuously assisting the internally displaced Sri Lankans".

Testimonies from the released from Manik Farm Camp

Groundviews

Testimony 1

Around 50-52 IDP families from Zone 5, Manik Farm were brought outside the camp with their belongings and asked to leave without any assistance. No transport provided. No proper documentation was given to prove the release. The military brought our belongings in a tractor until the entrance of the camp and then handed over to us. We walked till the entrance. Once our belongings arrived, we were asked to go home. But we didn't have any facility to go. We didn't

know where to go and how to go. This happened around 4.30 in the evening on 29th September.

All families had a minimum of one pregnant woman in a family. The total number of individuals were around 170.

5-6 families went to Mannar since they had relatives. But they came back midway since they got checked on the way and sent back to camps due to the reason that they didn't have proper paper work to confirm their release. Those families came back and asked the camp police to give them a letter. Police officer signed a document and those families went back to Mannar. We don't know what happened after that to

them. Before leaving from camp, we, five families, had asked police to write down our names and ID numbers in sinhala and sign it. These are the only documents we have. Though it is signed by the police officer, there is no official rubber stamp on it.

We have gone through very bad things in life. We fear what will happen to us.

Testimony 2

We are 5 families, 17 individuals, staying at this lodge somewhere in Vavuniya town. We are terrified. We were supposed to go to Jaffna and they told us that they will take us to Jaffna by bus. But

see what had happened to us. We can't trust anyone and we are terrified of talking. (This person was literally shaking as he was eating his dinner. All of them had bought food parcels.)

One from the lodge said, "This is charity. How can I let them stay outside. They have suffered enough. Please make arrangements for them to reach their homes safely tomorrow."

There were more IDPs seen in another lodge in front of this lodge. Not entirely sure, but could be around another 5 families. We don't know what happened to the rest of the families. The Government Agent is unreachable. She had apparently gone shopping,

when one called her home.

The UN, one of the persons we spoke to said had tried their best to give these people a ride to Vavuniya Kachcheri. But the GA refused and said that she is taking care of them. She obviously did not. The UN also said that every family has a release slip, which is supposed to be yellow in colour. However, the families in the first lodge said that they didn't have any such slip.

Update from the field:

The families stayed in different parts of Vavuniya went to the kachcheri this morning. They are being assisted there in terms of obtaining necessary assistance for their return.