

## NEWS

# Tamil refugees going 'home' to open prisons

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AsiaNews

IN villages in Mannar district, the government's 'Northern Reawakening' programme has not brought promised changes. Homes are still broken; services are non-existent, and freedom of movement still limited by heavy military presence. The government had promised them homes, land to farm and a life back to normal after years of war, but people who fled villages in northern Sri Lanka's Mannar district found something quite different when they got home after fleeing the area in 2007 amid heavy fighting between the Sri Lankan military and Tamil Tigers.

Their homes are broken, fields cannot be farmed, and the soldiers are everywhere. There are no basic services and the situation is such that in villages like Kokkupasayan primary school children, all 80 of them, have no chairs or desks to study with.

After successfully ending the 30-year old war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the government launched a 'Northern Reawakening' programme (Uthuru Wasanthaya). It promised a new life for the residents of one of the most war-torn areas in the country. Back on 30 April 2009, the first 122 families went home, joined on 9 June by many more, all eager to repopulate the villages of Arripputhurai, Silawaturai, Bandaraweli, Pokkarni and many other small hamlets in the district of Mannar.

"We are happy to be home even if our houses are broken. But we have no reason to rejoice even if they say we are free," a fisherman in Arripputhurai told AsiaNews. "We were told that we

would get projects that would support us, projects for reconstruction and development, but they only fixed bridges and roads,' a villager said.

Instead, the authorities are monitoring residents and fishermen are allowed to work only between 6 am and 6 pm.

"The 4,000 acres we used to farm before we fled are now under military control," a farmer said.

"We are living in an open prison," said Fr Seemanpillai Jayabalan, parish priest in Arripputhurai. "People have no hope for development. They have lost their property and many homes are a total write-off."

NGOs are not allowed in the area and "all aid must go through the government's Rehabilitation Task Force," the clergyman said.

Checkpoints are everywhere, so that human movement is under tight control.

"The military say that the LTTE does not constitute any danger anymore," Father Jayabalan; yet "people cannot freely go the jungle to fetch the wood they need to repair their homes. There is a ban on fires and there are still mines in some areas."

Anyone who needs help to repair a roof or rebuild a wall in his home can only get government handouts. Wood, roof-tiles, plastic sheets and even branches from coconut trees can be obtained only through the Rehabilitation Task Force; no one has the right to get anything any other way.

Father Jayabalan is troubled by what is happening. "What is purpose of all this, if the authorities do not take care of the people?" he said.



Civilians being released from the Vavuniya camps are being taken to smaller detention centres in other parts of the NorthEast while tensions increase in the main camps with disappearances and shootings

## Army shoots civilians in internment camp

TamilNet

SIX civilians, including 2 women and 3 children, were wounded as the Sri Lankan Army opened fire on them at the Cheddikulam internment camp.

One 8-year-old child was severely wounded and had to be urgently transferred to Anuradhapura hospital from Vavuniya hospital after the incident.

The incident occurred after several days of heightened unrest and increasing tensions, which saw civilians held at the camp clash with Sri Lankan Army soldiers.

The group of 6 were said to have gone to collect firewood as they were shot at by the SLA.

With the World Food Programme no longer providing cooked meals, as of September 17th, and a lack of basic cooking facilities, collecting firewood is one of the few remaining ways in which civilians can cook food.

This is the first undisputed example of soldiers opening fire on civilians held in these camps.

The Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence claimed that the group were trying to escape from the camps, where they are being held against their own will.

However, this breaks a pledge by Brig. S Perera, the senior military official in charge of the camps in Vavuniya.

He earlier insisted to reporters that anyone trying to flee would be "tackled to the ground", instead of being fired upon.

The Sri Lankan Ministry of

Defence stated that the civilians were an "unlawful gathering".

Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara also later claimed that soldiers were pelted with stones.

In an interview with Reuters, he stated "a man tried to lob a grenade. Our people (soldiers) fired towards that area for self defence and to prevent escape".

Each civilian has been tediously "screened" by the Sri Lankan Army, before being forced into the barbed wire enclosed camps.

Nineteen civilians at the camp were arrested following the shooting. No soldiers were hurt in the incident.

This follows reports of an earlier clash between civilians and Sri Lankan Army soldiers that occurred after the arrest and assault of 31-year-old youth Paranchami Chandramohan.

The young man was arrested by force and moved to an unknown area of the Poonthotham Teachers Training College in Vavuniya, which is currently being used as an "unofficial detention centre" according to Amnesty International.

He was not seen for over two days, despite constant requests from the civilian inmates of the camp, which prompted them to throw stones and attempt to breach the fences of the camp.

He was then released to Vavuniya hospital for treatment.

Amnesty International confirmed that they were aware of the existence of "at least 10 such facilities in school buildings and hostels originally designated as

displacement camps in the north" and that "there have also been frequent reports of other unofficial places of detention elsewhere in the country."

The international aid organisation also reported how several paramilitary groups, namely the EPDP, PLOTE, TELO and both TMVP factions are also active in Vavuniya and "have been implicated in human rights violations".

Many international organisations, such as the New York based Human Rights Watch, have criticised the camps as a form of "illegal detention" and described them as "open prisons".

There have also been warnings that the rapidly approaching October monsoon rains could create a massive crisis in the low lying and congested camps.

"The civilians locked up in these detention camps have a right to liberty now, not when the Government gets around to it," Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said.

"Sadly, the Sri Lankan Government has a track record of lying, deceiving and breaking promises to civilians displaced by the conflict," he said.

"The UN, donors and bilateral partners should demand immediate, concrete progress and not let themselves be fooled again by empty Government promises."

Colombo claims to have released nearly 10,000 civilians, but it has emerged that many have simply been moved to smaller transit camps, in other districts.

Approximately 280,000 civilians remain trapped in the camps.

## 40 disappear daily - Samaraweera

"IN George Orwell's 1984, the Ministry of Peace dealt with war, and the Ministry of Love with torture. Likewise we witnessed in Sri Lanka how the Peace Secretariat justified excesses carried out in the name of war against terrorism. And the so-called welfare camps are virtual prisons," Daily Mirror said quoting Mangala Samaraweera's charge against the Sri Lanka in the parliament.

"Certain reports indicate that 30 to 40 persons are abducted or

disappear on a daily basis from IDP camps," he said. In response to denial of Chief Whip Dinesh Gunawardena of the allegations, Samaraweera said the government must be transparent regarding the IDPs, and "[i]f the government allows Opposition MPs to form a committee and visit the camps then such claims can be verified. The government should act in a transparent manner." He also said those in the camps had people to look after them.