

FEATURE

'My life in Menik farm IDP camp -

A personal narrative by an inmate who spent 5 months in Menik Farm camp.

Introduction

A quarter million people, who have been on the run from artillery fire for more than a year, are now restricted by barbed wire inside an area less than one kilometre square. A comparison with the size of some heavily populated cities (Table) gives some idea of the congestion that is made even more acute by restricting the freedom of movement of the inmates. The scenario has drawn the attention of United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, governments of many leading countries and several other local and international NGOs, as well as all the major media.

The scenario has continued for over six months and there is no end in sight despite pressures applied on and promises made by the Sri Lankan Government. The account below adds to the existing descriptions of the camp conditions and is based entirely on my first hand experience as an inmate in the zone-3 camp (Figure) for more than four months.

Administration

The administration of each camp named zone-0 to zone-5 is conducted by one sub office inside each zone. These sub offices in theory comes under the Assistant Government Agent Division (AGA) of Cheddikulam-Vavuniya. Each sub office has a "figure head", a Tamil, who used to be the head of an AGA division in Vanni prior to displacement and as a rule these "figure heads" are not interned inside the camp. Scores of staff, all of them Tamils, who worked under these heads in Vanni, who are presently interned inside the camps, staff the zone sub offices and live in fear and are eager to get out just like any of the other inmates.

Above each of these "zone figure heads" are another head who are all Sinhalese and are employees of the Ministry of Resettlement. The military units that support these "Sinhalese civil servant heads" work in close association with them. The Tamils inmates, "the Tamil figure head" and all other interned staff, take orders from the military.

Once when I was in the sub-office a convoy arrived with the Minister of Resettlement and several personnel with video cameras. While the minister took photographs standing in front of the sub office we, the inmates, were chased out. Then a van with video cameras drove by and started throwing bread and some "sam-



Many elderly civilians continue to be interred in the Sri Lankan military run camps, with no access to medical aid and insufficient food

bol" at the inmates crowded behind the office.

The inmates rushed competing for the bread while the amused cameramen were videoing. Observing the scene it seemed to me that these video shots will be screened on the state television that night with the news of the minister's visit to the camp for the pleasure of the Sinhala viewers. Inmates on many occasions have told me of seeing similar scenes being videoed.

Military

"When we risked our lives to escape from the war zone we viewed the Sri Lankan army as our saviours. Just three months later we hate them and see them as "masters"- a 40 year old male inmate.

Gun and stick (long baton rods) wielding military control the inmates at all times. I have not witnessed the guns being used on inmates though I have heard guns being fired on many occasions. The sticks on the other hand were used regularly reminding me of the way black slaves were beaten in the "Roots" television drama. Being treated worse than animals is a very accurate description. The following incident is typical.

A medical employee inmate was regularly carrying some

refrigerated medicines from one OPD clinic to another inside the same camp. The employee used a short cut through the tents instead of using the longer gravel road. One military duo attempted to stop the employee suspecting that he is a seller of some goods. Such sellers are treated like criminals as described later. When this employee in question failed to stop because he never suspected that the target of the military order to stop was him. The angered military duo drove their motorbike through the narrow space between the tents; bringing down clothes that were hanging on strings stretched cross the tents; and endangering young children playing in that space.

They reached the employee, stopped and got off the motorbike and walked angrily towards the employee shouting something in Sinhalese. The Tamil employee who does not understand Sinhalese kept repeating "hospital.. hospital", which is a word most of the people in world would understand. (Indeed 95 percent of the inmates all of whom are Tamils do not understand Sinhalese where as 99 percent of the military all of whom are Sinhalese do not know Tamil and give their orders as "masters" in Sinhalese which the "slaves" do not understand.)

The enraged military man

kicked the employee on his face and stomach several times with his boots while the employee kept repeating "hospital.. hospital". It was only after the military man was too tired to deliver any more kicks that he stopped to look at what was in the box that the employee was carrying. Several of us witnessed this in close quarters frozen in fear. When the scene cleared I asked one senior government employee inmate if this misconduct by the military ought to be reported. I was told that if I attempt anything like that I will "disappear".

I have on many occasions taken the trek on the gravel road from one end of the zone-3 camp to its sub-office. This gravel road also separates zone-3 and zone-2 camps. It is therefore an area where the master-slave scenario is played out frequently when the inmates of one camp attempt to go to the other through the barbed wire to meet family members and friends. Anyone caught while attempting to cross are beaten brutally and the degree of brutality became worse as the inmates appeared undeterred by the military brutality.

In reality, the people were desperate to see and help family members and friends in the adjacent camp who have arrived at different times from the war zone and have lost close relatives in the

war. Military brutality in such circumstance was ineffective. Though some procedure was instituted to let a limited number of people to crossover to the other camp for the day, this was ineffective and people continued to defy the military and breach the barbed wire behind its back.

Living area

It was obvious when we arrived in the camp that even the basics like water, toilets and tent were not in place to hold the people they are detaining. Many of us drank the water that were not meant for drinking and ended up with diarrhoea almost immediately after arrival. One could go on about the conditions at the start. There were improvements as time went by but only in comparison to what was there to start with.

The tent was unbearably hot once the sun came out but there were hardly any shade to take shelter from the sun; the place was like a desert with crowded tents. Within two months the tarpaulin material used for the tents were shredded to pieces by the strong winds that started in June. For more than a month we lived in shredded tents with no privacy at all until they were replaced. The wind during June/July was extreme and it was like living permanently in a sandstorm.