

FEATURE

'My life in Menik farm IDP camp' ...

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Family separation

Family separation caused by many factors is yet another ordeal that runs through the community. Contacting family living elsewhere also became an ordeal because most people have lost the addresses and phone numbers during the escape.

Until after May, the camp postal service was non-existent and the camp phone service that permitted a three-minute call required standing in queues for two days; most of the time without success. Possessing a mobile phone was a crime and remained a crime until the time I left the camp. For a short period during July the military was even confiscating radios because of the rumour that the Voice of Tiger radio service had restarted.

Hundreds of injured people were taken by ICRC ship throughout the war period from Vanni. Often an adult family member and sometimes young children who had no other care giver left in Vanni accompanied the injured. The injured person and the accompanying family members were separated within a day or two of arrival and the family members were taken to the camps while the injured was sent away to some hospital.

I have known family after family desperately trying without much assistance from any authorities to locate the injured family member who could have been transferred to any number of the hospitals. Many a tearful months were spent by these families not knowing anything about the fate of their injured family member. Reunion of the injured with the family in many cases took place purely by the efforts of the family with next to no help from the authorities.

The war conditions and the eventual escape from the war zone separated families. Often while escaping part of the family would cross over while the others failed to cross over. Again many families wrote dozens of letters and made many tearful trips to the sub-office trying to locate the missing members. The success often came by sheer luck and not through any set procedure. It was chaos all around.

The most heartbreaking scenes prior to June was when bus loads of refugees were just arriving in the camps. People in the camps would run behind these buses hoping to catch a glimpse of a missing relative. If someone in the bus waves at them, there would be endless speculation on to whom the wave was directed and who that person was. These were all signs of longing that the family members who were not already in the camp had survived and made it across.

It is these people suffering intense anxieties about friends and families who were brutally

stopped by the military from entering adjacent camps to check-out if the missing loved one has arrived there.

The number of times inmates were brutally beaten when caught attempting to cross is countless. The camps were full of stories on how even women were beaten up. Walking down the gravel road that separates zone-2 and zone-3 one can see the barbed wire being breached at several places where the determined people have made spaces to crossover. The military would at gunpoint gather young men to mend these breached places and the people kept breaching them again and again.

Once I saw an old man just squatting on the zone-3 side of the gravel road watching through the barbed wire the goings on in zone-2. A military person walking past called the old man on to the road and started beating him. It was clear to me that the beating on this occasion was purely for sadistic pleasure. I have seen a few more instances of sadistic actions by the military. The beating of the hospital worker described earlier also was of this category.

The military also separated families by taking away people suspected of LTTE membership at Omanthai where all refugees were first recorded. Trying to locate the whereabouts of such members was the most traumatic. In many cases families did not even know if the member had perished in Vanni or were taken away by the military. ICRC played a part in giving information to the families whenever it managed to find out the whereabouts of the missing person. If the names are not in ICRC list then locating such cases is impossible. Many families were still searching for members in this category when I left.

If there was any doubt that the Menik Farm camps are anything other than prisons the procedure in place for outside visitors to meet inmates will clear away any doubt. Each zone has a space allocated where outsiders must come to seek face to face meeting with inmates. There were times when they were barred from bringing anything to be given to the inmates. This was relaxed later. The visitor gives a piece of paper to the personnel manning the place with the names of the inmates they wish to meet. This will be announced in the public announcement system.

Mind you, not every tent is within the audible limits of this announcement system. By the time the inmate hears the announcement and takes the long trek to the meeting place anything from one to two hours would have passed. Across a divide separated by barbed wires the inmates and visitors must identify and signal to each other that they will enter the meeting area on the next turn. A fixed number of



inmates (around 50 in zone-3) are permitted into the meeting area at a time and their corresponding visitors are also then permitted in.

The actual meeting area is divided by iron sheets up to the chest and above it are wooden grills similar to what one would find in a prison. The visitors and inmates can talk through this grill and also exchange items over the grill. One is permitted only around 20 minutes maximum to talk because there will be hundreds more waiting. Even within this short time one is often interrupted by the military demanding the national identity card of the visitor and details about the relationship to the inmate. The waiting area for the zone-3 visitors has no shade and they will be waiting in the burning sun for hours.

Deaths

If an inmate dies in a hospital outside camp to which the inmate was transferred earlier, there is a small chance he or she will get something resembling a funeral. Of course there must be a relative who is a permanent resident of Vavuniya who is willing to hold the funeral in their home. If this is the scenario then only three relatives from inside the camp are permitted to leave the camp to attend the funeral.

A police person is sent with them and the very next day this police person must ensure that the inmates are back in camp. A three and a half year old boy died near my tent and his aunts who brought him up were not allowed to even go and see the dead body of the boy. Any death within the camp has no chance of a funeral. The body is just removed by the military and nothing is heard of after that.

Even in death families have no privacy to mourn. While people close to the deceased mourned onlookers would gather around because it all had to be done in the

open space.

Once there were rumours of three to six bodies of young women floating in the river adjacent to the camp. There were speculations as to the reasons for the presence of these bodies. There were rumours of white-van abductions within the camp. There were also stories of a young man disappearing while going to collect water.

We were not treated like people with intelligence who deserve to find out what is going on. There were only rumours based on such facts and no way of finding out anything else.

There were these people whom the camp inmates called 'CIDs'. They were apparently senior LTTE members who had been taken away and then "released" into the camp to be with their families. Their job is to spot LTTE members and LTTE Police members who have not reported to the military.

One such CID man was living close to my tent. I have seen him interrogating other men suspected of close liaison with LTTE. This CID man has apparently said that he is doing this after he was beaten severely until he agreed to do this task. We also heard another well known female LTTE member coming in Sri Lankan military uniform to the camps and identifying LTTE members in the camp.

What we talked about

Until end of May, till the last of the displaced arrived, most people talked a lot about who were killed since they had left. Stories of entire families being killed were common in the conversations of the inmates. Especially when extended families or people from the same locality met for the first time since getting out of the war zone, they had numerous stories to share about the fate of the unfortunate relatives and villagers.

How best to trace missing relatives was always part of this topic of conversation. Descriptions of the experience of crossing over from the war zone were the ones described in minute details by those who had displaced in March. While crossing over people faced intense fears of being shot at either by the military or by the LTTE. Families often got separated when they were fired at. Wealthier people hired boats to cross over. One mother lost all of her four children when her boat was fired at by the military suspecting it to be an LTTE boat.

Those who arrived in May described the experience of the last few days of the war in great detail. Many said that during the last few days they never walked erect due to fear of being hit by shelling. When making the move to exit the area they said that they had to walk over dead bodies.

Other topics included the amount of money they had wasted in transporting their possessions as they displaced again and again in Vanni. The loss of their entire possessions was acutely felt and discussed over and over again.

When feeling a little less tense the inmates never tire of describing their yard and all the trees and vegetables that would be growing in their yard. The soothing shades of large mango and jack trees in their yard were frequently remembered and contrasted with the lack of shade from the scorching sun in the camp.

The going on in the camp itself also dominated the conversation of inmates who were living near each other. The most common topic is the fights among inmates that always took place at the water collection queues. These fights indicative of the tension caused by competition for the limited availability of water created a very bad atmosphere among the inmates who were otherwise very amicable and helpful to each other.