

## NEWS

# A view framed by barbed wire

The Economist

KANCHANA asks to go by a false name, but seems self-assured for a teenager. And no wonder. Her experience of Sri Lanka's civil war, which ended in May after a seaside slaughter of the leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would put years on anyone.

For five years she was marooned in the Tigers' northern fief. Kanchana and her sister had left their village in Thampalagama, an area in the east more loosely controlled by the LTTE, for a holiday with a brother living there. But their travel passes were lost and without these the Tigers let no children of fighting age leave them. In 2007, as the army advanced, the Tigers recruited her brother and sister.

The advancing troops reached Kanchana last April. All belonged to Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority. Yet they did not rape her as she had been led to expect. Instead they shared their thin rations with her. But then came three-and-a-half months interned in Vavuniya. Over 260,000 Tamil refugees were crammed into 16 camps there, with poor food, overflowing toilets and, last month, flooding in which at least five drowned. One sibling was imprisoned among 11,000 former Tiger cadres. The other is probably dead.

A cousin of Kanchana's, his wife and three children were killed, with about 20 others, when an army shell hit their makeshift bunker. That was the main cause of the civilian slaughter, though the Tigers also killed refugees, both in crossfire and deliberately, to stop them escaping. Her best friend, of the same age, and really called Kanchana, was killed after the LTTE gave her a gun and sent her to the front.

Now back in her village in Thampalagama, the surviving "Kanchana" was among the first refugees to be released, in August. With them the truth of the bloody end to Sri Lanka's 26-year war, which the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa has tried to hide by bullying journalists and reporting "zero civilian casualties", is coming out—at an awkward moment. The government faces human-rights probes from both America and the European Union. The EU's, to inform a decision on whether to reissue a valuable trade concession to Sri Lanka, said human-rights violations made it ineligible.

Kanchana and her local women friends could have added testimony. Sitting together in a small red-tiled shack, one says her 25-year-old son has disappeared, like hundreds of Tamil youths in the past three years. Only the word of a local Hindu astrologer gives hope he is alive. Another's nephew was imprisoned and tortured for a month by pro-government



Even for the Tamils who get out from behind the barbed wire confines of the Vavuniya camps, life is limited by the realities of post war Sri Lanka, including missing loved ones and no access to resources

thugs. He is now crippled. A third sent her 21-year-old son for his safety to Colombo. He has been in prison there for nearly two years without charge. Since the government ordered the International Committee of the Red Cross to quit eastern Sri Lanka in July, the women say they have had no one to petition for their sons. "Who will listen to our grief? Who will bring back our children?"

Evidence of reconciliation between Tamils and the Sinhalese-dominated government, which the president has promised, is hard to find. The government is trying to recruit more Tamil policemen. But such measures look paltry against an internment policy that the EU's report calls a "novel form of unacknowledged detention". The government justifies it by citing two reasonable fears: that surviving Tigers will regroup, and that mined areas of

the north are unsafe for locals to return to. Yet the government has made only creeping efforts to identify those it could safely release—perhaps a majority of those detained. Such failings suggest that it sees them all as potential enemies.

Under pressure from Western governments, which pay for most of the camps' food, Mr Rajapaksa promised that 70-80% would be freed by the year's end. That was three months ago. Some 20,000 have since been let out, by the government's perhaps ambitious estimate. Most were the old, the sick or pregnant women, or Hindu priests and stray easterners like Kanchana. Indeed, she was lucky: some who returned to the east later have been detained in ill-prepared schools and temples.

Monsoon rains are expected this month to flood around 25% of Vavuniya's main camps, so 100,000 of the 220,000 people

there need shifting. The government says 67,000 can go to their home areas in the east and to other places outside the LTTE's heartland, like Jaffna and Mannar—even if they may be redetained there. And it plans to release around 30,000 of the disabled, sick and pregnant and their dependants to host families. But there is no immediate prospect of returns to the Tigers' strongholds of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Mr Rajapaksa's target may therefore be unfeasible. With local and foreign aid groups already reluctant to support the new makeshift camps, arguments loom.

Encouraged by the government, thousands of Sinhalese are meanwhile flocking to the east to reclaim land from which the LTTE chased them or their parents. This risks causing conflict with Tamils and Muslims now farming the land—and reinforces the Tamil belief that the govern-

ment means to "Sinhalese" the north and east.

In Irakandy, a short drive from Trincomalee, 1,050 Sinhalese, representing over 350 families, have gathered to reclaim land from which 80 families were driven in 1985. Many of those now living on it have documents supporting claims to have bought the leaseholds to the land. Yet the incomers, under army protection in a nearby community centre, are confident that their ancestral lands and more will be given to them. Priyantha Malvangaoda, a well-dressed businessman from Colombo, says he and six siblings are all staking claims, his father having been driven from a nearby one-acre farm in 1985. "All of us need some land."

This is worrying. So long as Tamils feel abused by a racist Sinhalese state, the conflict may resume. Economic development of their shattered regions, which the government is planning, is unlikely to change that. Hence the government's continued war-footing—but this is in turn also reinforcing Tamil grievances.

Foreign criticism is not going to make the government change. It gets little bilateral support from Western countries, instead relying on those unfazed by its abuses, such as Iran, which last month renewed a four-month, interest-free oil credit. Indeed, criticism helps rally Sinhalese nationalists against the government's new big foe, Western imperialists. On the EU trade privileges, a letter-writer to the Daily Mirror newspaper warns Western countries that they will suffer "just like in Iraq and Afghanistan" for offending Sri Lanka.

Nor is Sri Lanka's democracy likely to come to Tamils' aid, despite general elections due by next May and a presidential poll expected shortly before it. Mr Rajapaksa has recently tried to mend fences with Tamil opposition politicians. But he looks poised for a thumping victory even without Tamil support.

## Accelerate resettlement says UNDP

SRI LANKA, which won its war, has a responsibility by its people to win the peace by accelerating the resettlement process of the displaced, UNDP Director for Asia and the Pacific, Ajay Chhibber told the Daily Mirror newspaper.

"While we understand the government's concern to have proper logistics in place before the IDPs return to their places of origin, we have conveyed to the government that an undue delay in the process will go to undermine the faith the IDPs and the international community have on the government" the UNDP Regional Director was quoted as

saying.

"We sincerely hope that Sri Lanka will respect the commitment it made to its people and the international community" he reportedly said, adding that the UNDP has set aside a big budget to help the returnees once the government sends them to their places of origin.

Chhibber said he expressed the UNDP concerns to Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama when he met the latter recently in New York. He added that a swift yet well co-ordinated resettlement programme will help the government to win the confidence of the displaced population, which he

said would benefit the government immensely in the long run.

Meanwhile, a call has gone out in Jaffna for urgent food donations to support the displaced who have been moved from the internment camps in Vavuniya to camps in the Jaffna islets.

Jaffna Government Agent, K. Ganesh, extended the urgent call to local and international non-governmental organizations in Jaffna to provide food for the displaced taken to the islets of Jaffna and detained in Sri Lanka Navy special camps.

The dry food rations given to the displaced by the World Food Programme (WFP) are insuffi-

cient to meet their needs as they do not get any extra food from the government, the GA said at an urgent meeting with the representatives of NGOs in Jaffna Secretariat.

Altogether 7,742 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have been transferred from Vavuniya camps to the islets of Jaffna. They are mainly detained in SLN special camps in Vealanai, Oorkaavatturai, Neduntheevu and Kaarainakar while some of them are held in the abandoned houses and some staying with their relatives.

The IDPs had fled their homes in the islets in 1990 due to Sri Lanka Army offensives.