

NEWS

Seeking any escape from the camps

The Australian

WHEN Muthu Kumaran returned to Sri Lanka in February 2007, he had hoped, even expected, that his Tamil people were about to win independence.

An Australian citizen and civil engineer, he wanted to be there when a Tamil state was established, freed from majority Sinhalese rule, and he wanted to lend his expertise in water management, too.

Instead, the father of two from Sydney's west would endure the brutal reality of the Sri Lankan government's final push to wipe out the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the militant Tamil Tigers.

Kumaran was not only swept up in the renewed hostilities of a 25-year civil war, he was also detained in one of the notorious internment camps that are still home to nearly 300,000 Tamils.

He returned to Australia in the first week of August this year, having managed to buy his way out of the largest military-run camp in Sri Lanka, at Manik Farm.

And with so many Tamils still detained in their homeland, and the Rudd government wrestling with how best to cope with those who have escaped and are seeking asylum in Australia, Kumaran has decided to speak out about his experience and the plight of his people.

"People need to know, the international community needs to know, what it is happening in Sri Lanka," Kumaran tells Focus.

"The US, Britain, Australia, they talk about democracy and human rights. Well, they cannot keep their eyes closed to these things."

Fearing retribution here in Australia as well as for his extended family in Sri Lanka, Kumaran - not his real name - has requested his identity not be revealed.

Having first left Sri Lanka 35 years ago, Kumaran had planned on staying for an extended period when he returned in early 2007, perhaps to retire there eventually.

Basing himself in the northern city Kilinochchi, the de facto Tamil capital, he initially worked alongside non-government organisations Oxfam, Solidar, Forut and ZOA on water sanitation issues, as well as helping set up livelihood projects: teaching women how to dry banana leaves and make baskets for sale and setting up street stalls. He also taught English in schools.

However, in January last year the Sri Lankan government withdrew from a ceasefire arrangement with the LTTE and the military began moving north into Tigers-held terrain in a bid to wipe them out.

By December Kilinochchi was being targeted in bombing raids and Kumaran had to flee



Conditions in the camps were overcrowded and unsanitary, with insufficient food for the people there

with more than 100,000 residents.

The Sri Lankan government directed Tamils to evacuate to a designated safe zone at Visuwamadu about 10km away.

For the next 5 1/2 months Kumaran remained on the road, herded south through seven safe zones alongside hundreds of thousands of other banished Tamils known as internally displaced persons, or IDPs.

At each stop, an impromptu camp would be established in the belting heat, tents erected, bunkers, ground wells and toilets dug out, hospitals set up.

Then a few days later the bombs would resume and this mass of humanity would move again, the numbers swelling all the time.

"The roads would be chock-a-block. Lorries, tractors, bullock carts, pick-ups, motorbikes, push-cycles, people walking, everyone carrying bags. There were young children, pregnant ladies, babies, people on stretchers, you've never seen anything like it," he says.

Kumaran also says they regularly came under fire along the way from bombs dropped by the Sri Lankan air force, rockets from naval ships, long-distance shelling and rifle rounds from the jungle bordering the roadside.

He says he saw people killed and many injured. He ferried the bodies, dead and alive, to the nearest hospital or cemetery in a four-wheel drive.

"Twice my pick-up got hit, but luckily not me. I think maybe I saw a dozen people killed, maybe another 20 injured, right in front of me," he says.

By the time he left Mullivaikal in the second week of May, Kumaran was on foot, as were

almost all the 300,000 Tamils, his possessions reduced to just a plastic shopping bag containing clothes and his Australian passport.

Thirty-six hours later they came to a military screening point at Vavuniya, where everyone was frisked for weapons and directed to school grounds.

There, the sprawling crowd was ordered to divide into two groups: those who were associated with the LTTE and those who were not.

"We were told if we were

LTTE, to declare it and there would be an amnesty. But they said, 'We know you, if we find out you have lied, you will be severely punished,'" Kumaran recalls.

He joined the non-Tigers. They were then ordered on to buses and driven six hours to an area called Chettikulam, and a large swath of cleared jungle off the Vavuniya-Mannar Road. He had come to the Manik Farm internment camp.

Kumaran describes the camp as a series of blocks, separated

from each other by a road and strip of jungle. The facility was ringed by razor wire and guarded by armed troops.

He estimates about 2500 people were held on each block, housed in 160 tents, with 16 people to each 4mx4m tent. Each block also had a community kitchen, a medical facility and four toilets each for men and women.

Conditions were primitive at best, Kumaran says.

There were no plates or utensils, so meals of dhal curry and rice were eaten off plastic bags that were reused each day. Water was limited to two 1000-litre tanks a block. Disease was everywhere.

"I volunteered to be a translator for the Sinhalese doctors at the hospital. There was a lot of typhoid, chicken pox, fever, diarrhoea, malnutrition. People had large rashes because of the lack of bathing facilities, too," Kumaran says. "Our block, four people died while I was there, and another elderly gentleman hanged himself."

In all, he would be there for eight days. In that time he wrote to the Australian High Commissioner and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Colombo about his detention, letters a camp official agreed to send.

But before he heard back, Kumaran says he discovered via "the bush telegraph" he could buy his freedom.

He is reticent to reveal details of his escape or how much he paid, but he says he approached a local worker on his block who smuggled him out late at night

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Sri Lanka 'resisting' investigations

THE UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, criticized the Sri Lankan Government on the issue of "accountability" and for refusing to co-operate "to our many requests for an international investigation of what we say is widespread acts of killing of civilians."

She made the comments during a speech at a press conference in Brussels.

"We have pointed out that they have in the past attempted to hold national investigations of very serious acts of killings that occurred of NGO and humanitarian workers and these investigations were dropped," said Pillay.

"They do not have a very good record in holding serious investigations. Now, I am engaged in discussions with the Secretary General over what kind of mechanism would be acceptable. But as I said the bottom-line is that the government is resisting these suggestions," said the for-

mer South African judge.

She also mentioned that "such a request has also been made by the (UN) Secretary General and we are working very closely with the Secretary General to hold the President of Sri Lanka to his promise which he made to the Secretary General that he will look into the issue of accountability and so we want to know what kind of mechanism is he setting up."

The UN Commissioner also mentioned that the Sri Lankan Government, both publicly and to the UN Secretary General stated that they would not allow her to enter the country.

Her call was reiterated by her colleague Rupert Colville a few days later.

"We still believe that something like the Gaza fact-finding mission is certainly warranted given the widespread concerns about the conduct of the war in Sri Lanka," said Colville, referring

to recent fact finding mission into the Israel-Palestinian conflict on the Gaza Strip earlier this year.

"It seems that more clarity is likely to emerge about who did what to whom and whether or not war crimes and crimes against humanity and other very serious war crimes were committed by one or both sides," said Colville, a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

"The issue of some 240,000 - 250,000 displaced people living in what are in effect internment camps continues to be of great concern... We hope the government takes serious actions to fulfill these commitments in the very near future" he added.

The statement comes after publication of a US State Department report that contained reports of atrocities committed at the climax of the war earlier this year. Sri Lanka has so far categorically rejected all calls for investigations into war crimes.