
LAND OF THE DISPLACED

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An estimated 6.57 lakhs of people in Sri Lanka have been uprooted from their homes owing to the ongoing ethnic conflict and are undergoing the trauma that displacement brings.

A small country with 18 million people, Sri Lanka is one of the world's principal sources of refugees and displaced persons. Nearly half of the two million-strong Sri Lankan Tamil population has been displaced internally. In addition, because of the ethnic cleansing pursued by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), thousands of Muslims and Sinhalese have become homeless and are in "welfare centres." In an Issue Paper published in October 1991, the United States Committee for Refugees rightly characterized Sri Lanka as an "Island of Refugees."

Sri Lankans becoming displaced in their own country is not a new phenomenon. In 1958, following the introduction of the "Sinhala only" Act and the subsequent *satyagraha* in the Galle Face Green, there were large-scale riots; thousands of Tamils left Colombo and other Sinhalese-dominated areas for the north and the east. In 1977, after the general elections, in which the United National Party (UNP) under J.R. Jayewardene came to power with an overwhelming majority, communal clashes erupted in different parts of the island. A large number of Tamils took shelter in camps. In 1981, on the eve of the expiry of the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact, large-scale violence was unleashed in the plantation areas to drive away from the island as many Indian Tamils as possible.

The July 1983 riots, which were of an unprecedented scale, marked a turning point in modern Sri Lankan history. Life was paralyzed in Colombo and other southern parts of the island. Tamil neighbourhoods were destroyed. In Colombo alone, nearly 1,00,000 Tamils, more than half the Tamil population in the city, were displaced. There was hardly any Tamil family that escaped death, destruction or displacement. Patricia Hyndman of LAWASIA pointed out:

Members of the police and armed forces had stood by and allowed attacks to be made on the Tamil people. Even worse, in some cases they had actively participated in the attacks... There had been a pattern in the violence... Gangs were transported from outside the districts. They had electoral lists with them from which Tamil houses, shops and addresses were identified.

Ethnic polarization, which was gradually building up, increased in intensity after July 1983. Even progressive Tamils belonging to radical trade unions and Left parties became conscious of the fact that "regardless of political ideology, they were identified as Tamils and not as Sri Lankans." The prolonged conflict since 1983, with occasional periods of ceasefire in between, has resulted in internal displacement as well as the flow of refugees to India and other parts of the world.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are those who have been forced or obliged to flee their homes or places of residence, as a result of, or in order to avoid, the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence and violations of human rights. They are persons who have been forcibly uprooted within their own country. Displacement has a traumatic effect on families, cultures and the security of a stable society. The complexity of the problem is evident from the number of displaced persons, which is estimated between 20 million and 25 million. No region in the world is exempt from this epidemic.

The number of people affected by the prolonged conflict in Sri Lanka is estimated to be 6,79,214, belonging to 1,87,369 families. According to the Commissioner-General of Essential Services, 1,71,233 persons belonging to 40,750 families stay in 348 welfare centres; 4,85,405 persons belonging to 1,41,522 families stay with friends and relatives; and 22,576 persons belonging to 5,097 families are non-displaced but are economically affected. The exact ethnic breakdown is not available, but it is estimated that 78 per cent of the displaced are Tamils, 13 per cent Muslims and 8 per cent Sinhalese.

The border between the territories controlled by the government and the LTTE frequently changes as a result of the fluctuating fortunes of war. The terminology—cleared and uncleared areas, nearly cleared areas, gazetted areas, gray areas and border areas—illustrates the complexity of the situation. Civilians living in these areas are subjected to cycles of violence; they are caught in the crossfire, rendered homeless and displaced several times.

Two illustrations are given here to substantiate this point. When the Sri Lankan Army started advancing towards Jaffna in the second half of 1995, the Tigers forced the people of Jaffna to move to the Vadamarachchi, Tenmarachchi and Vanni areas. As a result, 3,00,000 people were displaced. They were forced to live in miserable conditions. The University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) put it thus: "By November 16 the city of Jaffna, for the first time in 600 years, was completely empty. The trauma was

extremely painful both mentally and physically." Regarding the Tigers' role in the exodus, the report said: "The roots of the exodus must be sought in the character of the LTTE's politics, its unchanging agenda of totalitarian power, its lack of concern for the people, and its duplicity resulting from a historical inability to negotiate as part of a political process."

The second example of lack of concern for the civilian population was the warning given to the people by the Tigers on November 10, 1999 to evacuate Vavuniya. It was estimated that nearly 1,00,000 people joined the exodus. Panic gripped the town, people vacated their homes in a hurry, traders pulled down their shutters, government offices closed and banks faced long queues of people desperately in need of money. Five days later, the Tigers thanked the people for their response and asked them to return to Vavuniya.

Caught between the inhuman Army and the ruthless Tigers, the displaced people have become pawns in their military games. In an interesting study on the impact of militarized violence on Sri Lankan children, Kenneth Bush has brought out revealing details. The children in the north and the east bore the brunt of the violence. Children are being increasingly used by the LTTE as soldiers and as intelligence gatherers; the natural response of the Army is to treat children with suspicion. Of the 9,00,000 children in the north and the east, 3,00,000 have been displaced. In Mannar, only 13 per cent of the people in the uncleared areas live in their homes. In Jaffna, according to conservative estimates, 81,000 houses have been damaged in military violence. The population of Vavuniya has doubled owing to the influx of people. Save the Children, a non-governmental organization (NGO), is working in Mannar with children who have been displaced as many as seven times during their lifetime.

From the human rights angle, displaced persons are the most vulnerable. The World Report, 1999, of the Human Rights Watch has pointed out:

The link between forced displacement and human rights is a crucial one. Human rights violations are a principal root cause of forcible displacement. The human rights of the displaced refugees and internally displaced persons alike are threatened while they are displaced; and respect for fundamental human rights is a key factor in the search for a durable solution to any situation of displacement.

The Vanni area, the bone of contention between the Army and the Tigers, is one of the worst affected in Sri Lanka. A Christian delegation that visited the region a couple of years ago pointed out that out of the population of 4,90,000, the displaced numbered 3,05,000. Children under 18 were estimated to be around 1,62,000.

Some people lived under trees. Sanitary conditions were awful. Proper drinking water became a luxury. A Report of the U.S. Committee on Refugees has described the conditions of the people of Vanni (when economic embargoes were in force) as follows: "The tens of thousands of displaced persons are at a high risk as the government will not provide them with food aid, allegedly because it views them as sympathetic to the LTTE."

Rohini Hensman graphically describes the agony and suffering of the displaced people. She narrates the poignant story of Anna's family. Anna's father pointed out the irony that "for two years between 1983 and 1985, they were living in the very same camps, when their home in Dehiwela was attacked and all their belongings burned." The family moved to Batticaloa and slowly rebuilt their lives. They are back now in the camps, having lost everything for the second time, "reduced to destruction once again." Anna's mother remarked:

The problem is that neither the armed forces nor the Tigers are the least bit concerned about the people... They are fighting for their own reasons... In Colombo they wanted to kill us because we were Tamils; in Batticaloa they wanted to kill us because I speak Sinhala and they thought I was Sinhalese. What we need is peace, not Eelam.

During this writer's previous visit to Colombo two years ago, officials of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) narrated the gist of a conversation between refugee women and representatives of Oxfam. One refugee woman said:

Our problem is not a shortage of cooking pots or shelter. Our problem is the war. If you offer cooking pots, we will take them. But if you ask what you can really do for us, we will say, help stop the fighting... If you can do anything to help bring peace, we will be able to take care of ourselves and stop being a burden on you.

The UNHCR is doing commendable work in Sri Lanka. Its presence dates back to 1987, when the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord was signed and its activities were linked to the repatriation of refugees from India. When the Second Eelam War commenced in 1990, the UNHCR, on a request made by the Sri Lankan government, expanded its activities to cover the internally displaced persons in the north and the east of the island. Together with other humanitarian organizations—the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the ICRC, the Save the Children Fund, CARE, Oxfam, Quakers, local NGOs and the Sri Lankan government—the UNHCR is trying to assist and protect the interests of the displaced people.

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