

But further, from a humanitarian perspective, is this path justified? The Government has portrayed the situation as a hostage situation. While this is not completely accurate, it is true that for most of the people in the North, leaving is not an option. But logic dictates that the solution to a hostage situation is not a frontal assault. That is guaranteed to victimize the hostages, and that is exactly what is happening now. This is especially true when the weapons used are fairly indiscriminate ones such as shells and incendiary explosives. Figuratively speaking, it is true that the LTTE has helped doused the Tamil people, but it is the Government that is currently lighting the match.

IV. The Current Offensive Will Create the Conditions for Peace

While I heard a wide variety of opinions from people in the North, there is one question they all essentially agreed on: "What will happen if the army invades the North?" Everyone told me it would be disastrous. Not only would it result in a virtual massacre of civilian life, but it would so embitter the people in the North against the Government that coexistence would become impossible. As one person said, it would cement

the Eelam ideology. If this offensive continues, the Government will be faced with two choices. Either crush the remaining Tamil people and finally provide them the peace of the grave, or grant them independence. The current offensive will not create the conditions for peace.

Shortly, the Government is to release its political package. For whom? The people that clamoured for a just political system currently see themselves as being attacked by the Government. To accept any solution under those conditions would be seen as being beaten into submission. That is a far cry from peace with dignity, the only peace we should consider. To ignore this fact is to admit that the release of the package is nothing but a political ploy to assuage the majority community, a fraction of the Tamil population, and the international community. No honest supporter of peace with justice can support this.

And finally, we must ask if, even then, will the island have peace? Will Tamil militancy be defeated or merely further inflamed? Will the LTTE, which is using the situation in the North to gain further control in the East, fade away into dejected defeat? The Package may be passed, but peace will be further away than ever, and the people will have suffered even more. ■

HOME-LANDS, BORDER ZONES AND REFUGEES: FACTS, FICTIONS, DISPLACEMENTS¹

Darini Rajasingham

Eelam is a killing field for our politics, A battle field for India, a grave yard for our people.

(Graffiti signed by the University of Jaffna at the Rajini Thiranagama Commemoration, Jaffna, November 1989 (photograph in *Someone Else's War* by the University Teachers for Human Rights Jaffna)

Over the past decade Sri Lanka's borders have moved. Today refugee camps and military camps alternatively plot a new perimeter across this island whose national airline still offers a forlorn promise of "paradise". Geographically, the new border stretches in a gentle arch from East to West—further south on the coasts and further north inland. In some places it extends over miles—traversing lush vegetation or the dusty plains and scrub jungle of the dry zone. This border is the invention of twelve years of war between successive Sri Lanka Governments and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. It constitutes a swathe of land between territory controlled by the Sri Lanka government and the LTTE.

Ethnically, the border comprises one of the most diverse areas outside the city of Colombo. Culturally, it is a space where war and peace resonate in curious ways. The boundary has its own (hidden) economy of fear, cooperation and co-existence: the Sri Lanka army, LTTE cadres, villagers and other big players in the conflict sometimes maintain an uneasy truce. Enemies sometimes cooperate for the good of others—particularly refugees and civilians—and for personal profit. At other times it is in these zones that war is most bitterly fraught. It is in this swathe of land that the bloodiest memories of massacres that perpetuate the logic of blood for blood are rooted.

The emergent border constitutes a "no man's land" (sic), and is hence also a space of conceptual possibility. Borders, zones where conventional categories are interrupted, inverted, and blurred as many recent theorists of culture crossings have noted "are good to think" (with). In this instance, the border is not all literary conceit—its existence has real implications for how any political solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is worked out. Along this border villages have appeared and disappeared, forests turn villages and return to wilderness,

place names transform overnight to suit political and ethnic interests as is the case with Manal Aru, now called Welli Oya. It is not a coincidence that some of the bloodiest battles between the LTTE and Armed forces have occurred along the border. It is at the border that the cultural geographies of the nation are most apparent because contested.

The emergent border-the result of war-challenges many of the dreams and certainties to which nationalists in Sri Lanka have clung. Yet many in the south remain oblivious of its existence. Until recently, those whose job it is to know and tell the state of the nation to the Sinhala public in the south denied the emergent border, perhaps because the new border is arguably a more powerful symbolic challenge than the LTTE to Sinhala dreams of dominance of the island of Sri Lanka. The Graffiti by the University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna, above, highlights another of the wages of war-Eelam is a dream turned nightmare for most Sri Lankan Tamils.

Borderlands: Remaking the Sri Lankan Imagination

Ethnically, the border zone comprises (internally displaced) Sinhales, Tamils, Moors, Malays, Burghers, some of whom are intermarried. Religiously, it comprises Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, those who worship all or some or none of these pantheons or associated gods. The new border zones are overseen and administered also by international (aid) agencies: from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to Service Civil International, Italian Relief, OXFAM and other non-governmental relief/development organizations, with the support of the Sri Lanka government and the LTTE.

On the West coast the border zone begins a little past Puttalam. Along the East coast, an area of dense ethnic mixing and contested colonization schemes, the border zone extends further south, up to and beyond Ampara. Inland, in the north central area of the island, Vavuniya is the last significant southern town. Beyond these points one travels north-wards at one's own risk. The regularity of army check-points along the road, and the barren razed look of the landscape shorn of vegetation in order to provide visibility for troops fearful of ambush, signals a dubious welcome to the border zones.

The border can be an extensive area. For example, along the west coast, Vanthavillu, about 10 miles north of Puttalam which was "hit" by LTTE cadres in 1989 is the last town of significance from the southern perspective. Both towns harbour refugees or in the language of international legal jargon "internally displaced people". Along the west coast, beyond Vanthavillu, again one travels at one's own risk (reduced while the peace process was-on-going), and then only with sanction of the army who require a military, government or press pass. At Illuvankulam about 18 miles north of Puttalam is the last army camp. Beyond Illuvankulam there are a few scattered villages with depleted and ethnically mixed

populations on the border of Wilpattu. Wilpattu, Sri Lanka's second largest national park which is now barely accessible due to poor roads which are being reclaimed by the jungle and its inhabitants, constitutes a small segment of the emergent border.

Among the Army camps and refugee camps which plot the emergent border also exist scattered purana (old) and new settlement villages. Many of the residents of Aluth and Purana Illuvankulam had been refugees at some point during the past twelve years of war. All the villagers we met there in March 1995, had returned to the village only three months earlier from camps in Puttalam, and then only about half the village had returned. Those who had returned has done so because they were tired of living on handouts in the camps. They returned to fields gone wild and homes ravaged by elephants but with hopes of peace and promises of resettlement allowances from the newly elected Peoples' Alliance government. The Minister of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction had visited the camps in Puttalam to encourage refugees to return in January. In March they were still waiting for a permanent peace and resettlement allowances.

While many border villages are ethnically homogeneous others are ethnically diverse. In the latter, a high degree of intermarriage among Sinhales and Tamils and to a lesser extent Muslims is evident. In Illuvankulam we met a Sinhala Army volunteer from Maravill who had married a local Tamil woman and contracted what anthropologists might term a *binne* marriage-where the man moves into the woman's household.

In many of these villages the Sri Lanka Army camps are problematic less feared than the LTTE. The state of war does not permit villagers who are predominantly farmers to earn their living off their lands for security concerns of the Army are paramount. The Army, we were told, prevents villagers from going to their fields at night and had banned the lighting of fires to keep away the elephants who destroy crops. Villagers may not carry torchlights at night. When the LTTE attacked in 1993 and killed 11 army personnel at the nearby camp, the villagers had been left alone. One villager had died in the cross -fire. Later the army had ordered the villagers to leave since they could not guarantee their safety. In other parts of the border the Army trains a home guard force, while elsewhere refugee camps are used as buffers against the LTTE. Along this border live those who have been repeatedly caught in the cross -fire; people who have been traumatized by war, people who have been refugees more than once.

The border zone has its own culture. The space where the war is most bitterly fraught, it is also the point at which ethnic co-existence and detente is a necessity. Thus a study of the situation of refugees and internally displaced people in Sri Lanka deemed the Sri Lanka relief programme one of the most successful refugee relief operations in ethnic conflict situations in the world. The US Committee for Refugees in its 1991 report on "Sri Lanka: Island of Refugees" comments: "humanitarian assistance to internally displaced people in Sri

Lanka can fairly be described as something of a model program... Relief and to obviously varying degrees, protection—for displaced people is provided by a number of different players..." Perhaps this is the reason that internally displaced people in Sri Lanka have not hit the BBC headlines as have refugees in similar situations in Rwanda or Bosnia. Alongside cooperation for relief has also developed a hidden economy around the transport of prohibited items. In Jaffna there are reliable reports that the LTTE uses Pajeros smuggled into the Jaffna peninsula.

Refugees - a Chain of Displacement

In Puttalam the majority of refugees are Muslims who found succour among fellow Muslims. The emigrants had been given a warm welcome and much sympathy when they first arrived and settled in the area. Now many of those who remain in the camps feel that they have overstayed their welcome. Many landlords who for five years did not charge them rent and allowed them the meagre produce of the land want their lands back. Recently, there were rumours that a fire that occurred in one of the camps had been ignited by the local landlord to hasten the departure of unwanted guests.

Some refugees who could afford to move out of camps rented houses, bought land and integrated or are trying to integrate into local life and the economy. By most accounts, the economy and town of Puttalam has expanded over the past five years. Of course garment factories and prawn farms also account for this growth. Schools in areas of settlement are over crowded with the influx of refugee children.

The refugees came to Puttalam from Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu. Many of them were tailors, petty traders, restaurateurs. They remember being ordered to leave their homes within twenty four hours and were told to take only their moveable property. The LTTE cadres had warned with characteristic brutality: "do not even dream of coming back". Many refugees in Puttalam have done precisely that - given up the dream of return. In Vanathavillu the refugees had come from closer - from the other side of Wilpattu, Silavathura. Some had not been ordered out but feared being caught in the cross fire between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka army.

Many of the inmates of camps in these areas have been displaced for over five years. For the under-fives, home is a refugee camp. For the middle aged and elderly home has become a space to be painfully forgotten. Without security home, houses and fields they say are useless. Some refugees who have married into local families say that even after a durable peace has been worked out they would prefer to stay where they are now. Others, particularly farmers whose livelihood stems directly from the land wish only to return. Displacement affects those who live off the land most. Farmers unlike service and/or government workers have found it most difficult to integrate into the local economy given the scarcity of land.

And, if it were possible to what would the refugees return? Today the houses left behind by Puttalam's Muslim refugees in the Jaffna peninsula house Tamil refugees. The LTTE administration resettles Tamils displaced from the south and from the areas near Sri Lanka Army camps in the peninsula where shelling and bombing is often severe, in the houses of departed Muslims, Sinhals and Tamils. Return, repatriation if and when peace returns, will mean a chain reaction of displacement.

The war between the Sri Lanka Government and the LTTE has swelled the ranks of refugees and internally displaced people the world over. Many displaced people, Tamils, Muslims and Sinhals, fled Sri Lanka Army and LTTE brutalities, alike. The population of displaced people has fluctuated from 1.7 million to half a million at various points in the conflict which escalated into war in 1983. Currently, it is estimated that there are over half a million internally displaced people in various parts of the Northern and Eastern provinces and the west coast of the country. A majority of them are concentrated along the extended border zone.

By far the most numerous are Tamil refugees. It is estimated that another half a million Tamils have become refugees overseas but there are no adequate figures of displacement. The decennial census of Sri Lanka scheduled for 1991 was not taken due to the conflict. What is clear is that five percent of the island's pre-war population has been displaced and/or resettled. This population shift has implications on a number of different levels, the most immediate of which is for any peaceful political settlement of the conflict. This will entail analysis of the long term effects of population shifts caused by the war on the workings of the proportionate representation system as well as addressing the real and imagined grievances of minority groups. The northern and eastern territory is claimed not just by the LTTE as Tamil homelands and will be regionally autonomous under any peace settlement. Will the government permit many of the displaced people who want to settle permanently in the areas where they have found refuge to do so? Will the LTTE accept those non-Tamil peoples whose exit they ordered in twenty four hours, five years ago, back? What of those who have given up the dream of return?

Resettlement in Imaginary Home lands

History repeats itself but not always as Marx anticipated in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. The emergent boundary appears to replace an ancient one in the island once called Taprobane by Arab traders. It seems to traverse an ancient border, for according to received readings of the ancient Buddhist chronicles—the Pali-vamsas—conflict between Sinhala-Buddhists and Tamils for control of the island in the border zones is hardly a recent phenomenon. Have not conflicts between the Sinhals and Tamils been recorded from the second century onwards? Yet the new border rents what has appeared to most natives, colonial administrators, and visitors since early this century as the natural, i.e. territorial and geographic unity and sovereignty of the island of Sri Lanka.

The purpose of this schematic account of constructions of past conflicts is to establish that the reordering of internal political boundaries in the island of Sri Lanka, Ceylon, Serendip, (the borders often shifted with the name and perspective), is not new. Four and a half centuries of Portuguese, Dutch, and British rule, not to mention pre-European political feuding among the island's principalities or what Tambiah terms "galactic polities", has meant the periodic shift and reconstitution of internal geo-political units and boundaries. Rather, it is the character of the boundary now emergent since Britain conquered and unified the island after six hundred years in 1815 that is noteworthy.

Unlike pre-independence and pre-British boundaries, which were geo-political the current boundary is ethno-national in character. The British after all rewrote the map of Ceylon by uniting the Kandyan highlands whose king was incidentally of Tamil descent with the far more ethnically mixed lowlands. Contrary then to what LTTE homelands propaganda and Sinhala nationalists claim, north-south conflict in the island was not always ethno-religious in character.

The new border has been forced upon the people of Sri Lanka by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in response to another shift that was begun with the colonization schemes undertaken by Sinhala nationalist governments in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The best known of these is the Mahaveli scheme. This process of resettlement which reconstituted Sri Lanka's ethnic map has been described by many social scientists (Kearny, Peebles, Tennakoon) and hardly needs recounting here. Rather what is note worthy here is that one of the reasons that the LTTE leader gave for withdrawing from the

peace process in his letter to President Chandrika Kumaranatunge was the resettlement of refugees in the contested border areas. The government had embarked on a process of resettling refugees with much pomp and ceremony of Trincomalee during the ceasefire. While such action is understandable given the plight of displaced people and the hopes of peace and security raised by the peace process and while we might question the violence with which the LTTE broke the cease fire, the fact remains that (re) settlement is not a politically innocent process. Resettlement in these areas must and can only take place with the sanction of all players in the conflict if displaced people are not to become yet again the pawns of war.

The war between the LTTE and successive Sri Lanka governments has invented the emergent border. Rather than seeing the shift and consolidation of present borders as the enactment of an ancient feud between Tamils and Sinhals from the time Dutugemunu and Elara, it is more relevant to view the border as an invention of modern ethno-national schisms. Yet, in another sense, the border is old; a culturally, ethnically, linguistically, religiously, regionally, porous space, it is and was the state of the nation now called Sri Lanka.

Notes

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