

Doctor condemns conditions in Sri Lankan detention camps

Our correspondent
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The Sri Lankan government has herded about 300,000 Tamil civilians who fled the north-eastern war zone into camps around the northern city of Vavuniya. While the government has dubbed them “welfare centres,” in reality they are detention centres where people are forced to live in crowded conditions without adequate food and other basic necessities.

Detainees faced the brunt of intense shelling and bombing when the Sri Lankan army launched its final offensive to annihilate the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Amnesty International has reported: “The civilians who survived weeks under heavy combat reached the camps sometimes badly injured, malnourished, exhausted and traumatised. The displaced civilians are suffering from widespread and serious human rights violations at the hands of government security forces and allied paramilitary forces, including enforced disappearance; extra-judicial executions; torture and other ill-treatments, and forced recruitment to paramilitary groups.”

The government has severely curtailed access to the camps for the media, aid workers and anyone else who might report on the conditions in the centres. We publish below an account given by a doctor to the WSWS about the condition of people in one camp. He was among team of doctors who visited the camp to provide medical treatment. We have withheld his name for security reasons.

A group of us went to a “hospital” located in

Chettikulam about 300 kilometres from Colombo, close to Vavuniya. It was, in fact, a school turned into a hospital. There was no residential doctor. Instead, doctors and other health workers from outside treated patients in a camp set up in the school grounds, making use of school furniture and folding beds. There were about 150 patients in the makeshift hospital.

The place was called a satellite camp of the main Manik Farm camp, where hundreds of thousands of people are interned, about three kilometres away.

When we were going to Chettikulam, we had to undergo a full security check at the army checkpoint near Manik Farm. We were not allowed cameras, camera phones or any recording items. Manik Farm is surrounded by three fences of barbed and razor wire. Through the fences we could see a sea of white tents. Thousands of people, including men, women and children, could be seen moving about under the hot sun. Trees had been uprooted in order to set up the camp. Hundreds of heavily-armed personnel were patrolling in and around the camp.

We heard several announcements over the public address system urging unidentified LTTE cadres to surrender. I have read about Nazi concentration camps. I thought these must be similar to them.

Conditions in the camp were appalling. Having enough water to wash one’s face and hands was a luxury. The water in this area is not good. People were given water brought from bowsers.

There were toilets covered with polythene and no doors at all. Due to the lack of water, people did not use

the toilets and instead relieved their bowels outside. But there was no water to wash after relieving. Food and other supplies were very limited. These people were not treated as human beings and had to live like pigs.

When we went to the medical clinic, thousands of people gathered around and asked for food and water. This spoke a lot about their condition. Hundreds came to complain about their illnesses. We asked them to form a queue. Within a few minutes, the queue stretched for hundreds of metres. However, we were able to treat only about 500 patients.

There were soldiers guarding them. The army provided a translator because the refugees were only able speak in their mother-tongue, Tamil. It appeared that they were reluctant to speak, cautious of the guard and translator.

Almost every child was malnourished, and most had wounds around their mouths. There was no point even talking about the quality of their teeth—many were suffering from lung and throat infections. Others had chickenpox or diarrhoea. For malnourished children, these diseases can be critical. Many required hospitalisation, but we were able to hospitalise only a few as the “hospital” was overcrowded.

These people had been living in the Vanni. Most of the children had been unable to go to school for years due to the war, as well as the lack of school facilities after nearly three decades of war. Before the army captured the area, it had been under LTTE control. One mother told me that most of the time she had had to feed her children with only rice and salt water. As the war intensified, they had had to pay 1,000 rupees (\$US8.70) for a one kilo of rice and 500 rupees for a kilo of dhal. Two tablets of Panadol had cost 100 rupees.

We could not see any facial expression from the majority of the detainees. They were traumatised. They could not give rational answers and they needed mental health treatment. Mothers had to feed infants with biscuits because they were not provided with milk powder. Ladies’ sanitary wear was not available at all. Almost all the people were dressed in old, dirty clothes.

It was shocking that there was not a single residential doctor for this camp which housed hundreds of refugees. Every doctor in our team thought the situation in the camp was pathetic. We don’t believe that the government will or can fulfil the sea of needs of these people. Even the most developed country could not do this alone.

People in the south of Sri Lanka don’t know the real situation in the camps since the government has restricted the news and aid access. The Sri Lankan media does not give a true picture. If people knew the reality, they would help the refugees. People did that after the tsunami [in December 2004]. I am sure of that. They might also condemn the situation in the camps and express anger.



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