

## **Civilian cost of a humanitarian operation: miseries of liberated peoples of Musali and Naanatan divisions in Mannar waiting to go home**

“We were not poor, we had our own house, we earned a reasonable income to feed ourselves and our children, but now, we have been forced to be poor and depend on others to feed our children and ourselves, and have no place to stay, our village is occupied by the Sri Lankan armed forces” was the comment of one woman who was amongst the thousands forced to vacate their homes and livelihoods by Sri Lankan armed forces in their quest to seek control of land.

When I visited Mannar with some friends and colleagues more than a month after yet another “humanitarian operation” by Sri Lankan armed forces, this time in Mannar, it became clear that civilians remains the only causality, with at least 12 having being killed and 1 disappeared. From what we heard from displaced people and church leaders, it was clear that militants associated with the LTTE had left long before government forces advanced, and the only people flushed out were the more than four thousands of civilians who were forcibly displaced and still living in makeshift camps with friends and relatives and camps with inadequate facilities. “Not a single shot was fired, the only effect of the “humanitarian operation” is that we, civilians were displaced”, said another displaced woman, now living in makeshift tents in a coconut estate adjoining the Naanatan Church.

Some people had been given just ten minutes to leave and most had had to abandon whatever possessions they had. Thousands had crossed the Aruvi Aaru, in two boats, till late night. Some had gathered in the church in fear of the impending offensive by the armed forces, and then had been forcibly sent away by the armed forces. Some had spent the whole day without any food. Even the priests in the areas subjected to the “humanitarian operation” had been forced to leave.

### **Civilians: only people killed in the “humanitarian operation”**

At least 12 people, including two children, amongst those forced to leave the area on the orders of the armed forces, had been killed by a claymore attack while traveling in a van. No civilians or church leaders were allowed to go to the site and it was only after three days that priests accompanied by some others brought those decomposed bodies to Mannar hospital and buried them late, in the presence of Bishop Rayappu Joseph of Mannar.

An employee of the Musali co-operative stores, a father of three children was last seen in his motor cycle en-route to Naanattan with the rest of the others fleeing the village. I heard that he had been last seen in an army vehicle and missing to date. He is alleged to have had with him co-operative stores money collection and valuables including jewellery. Authorities had been informed but no progress seems to have been made in finding out where he is and what has happened.

### **Prevented from going back home to the “liberated area”**

“All we want is to go home and live like we lived before” was a repeated cry we heard from many people displaced. They had not asked to be “liberated” and had become victims of a plan designed on their behalf, without their consent or involvement. “We were told we will be allowed to go back in one to three days, but now, we hear that we will not be allowed to go back till January” a man from Silawathura staying in the Naanatan Rice Mill told us. Authorities had not engaged in any consultation with these people about going back and they had not even been told why they would not be allowed to go back earlier. Many seem resigned to the fact that they would have no stake in deciding conditions and dates of going back, and would be at the mercy of the military.

### **Restricted go and see visits and lost properties**

Only people of Arippu had been allowed to go back and see the villages they were forced to vacate. One person who joined such a visit reported that all houses are intact, although the door to his house had been found broken. He reported that valuables such as TV, CD player, camera and even new clothes were missing, but seemed relieved that the fishing gear was still there. "I hope they will still be there when we can actually go back" he told us.

Priests and religious sisters who had visited Arippu had found that the mission house has been forcibly opened, the house in an utter mess and a petrol container. A religious sister had reported the loss of a laptop.

No one from other areas such Silawaturai, Kokkupadayan, Potkerny, and Mullikulam have been allowed to go back and they are all anxiously waiting to at least go back and check on their houses and belongings. But they have no say in visiting their homes and villages, and are at the mercy of the military.

### **Role of agencies:**

NGOs, UN agencies and ICRC, along with Church agencies had provided basic assistance such as food, shelter and other basic needs to displaced people. But people I spoke to seem to be of the view that international agencies, including UNHCR, seems content with providing relief items and services and not forcefully advocating on key issues, particularly about the right to return voluntarily. The IDP Unit of the National Human Rights Commission had undertaken a field visit to the area a few weeks before, but till now, doesn't seem to have made any headway on the question of IDPs right to return and to be consulted in this process. Church leaders seem to be only ones openly advocating with authorities on behalf of IDPs. Several civil society leaders and even some priests told me about fear of reprisals if they engage in advocacy with authorities and highlighting the suffering of the people.

### **Women and children:**

Children had not been able to bring their school books, equipment or uniforms. We heard that displaced teachers have commenced classes, in makeshift tents. The Human Rights Commission had found that "some children got fever because of the heat, new location and tired of their traveling."

Some of the welfare centres housing IDPs such as the Naanatan Rice Mill was clearly overcrowded. The Human Rights had observed that congestion has caused a lack of privacy for women. A priest told us that he had seen women wearing the same dress for many days and that they were also short of undergarments, an observation shared by the Human Rights Commission, which said women had received only a frock.

### **Security issues:**

IDPs in the Naanatan Rice Mill told us that they are not free to travel to town, and that they have to report to the security officials. The Human Rights Commission had reported the lack of female security officers and harassment and fears of IDPs due to inquiries by the armed forces inside the

welfare centers. The Human Rights Commission also reported that they had to intervene regarding the occupation by security forces of a temporary hut constructed for medical clinic at the Rice Mill.

### **The insecure and militarized environment of Mannar**

Between Medawachiya and Mannar, our vehicle was stopped at least 5 times each on the way as well as on our way back, in some checks points, it took around half an hour for us to get “clearance”. People in Mannar live in an environment of high insecurity. Throughout the night and even during the day, we heard shelling. We encountered military personnel almost every 100 meters, and were told that there is one military personnel for every 10 citizens in the Mannar island. Later in the evening, after around 7pm, the town seemed deserted and we were also warned not to venture out of the guest house.

Amongst the stories narrated to us was the story of a displaced fisherman, who had seen his 26 year old brother being taken into a military camp on the main Medawachiya – Mannar road, and his inquiries about his brothers fate had met with string of denials. The tortured body was later found. The brother had not wanted to pursue the case, saying that “my brother is already dead, but I have a family and children to look after”.

Two days before we were there, a priest had handed over a young man suspected of shooting a civilian to a local police station, having obtained a guarantee that the suspect would not be tortured and produced before a magistrate. “But I was wrong, I went the next day and he had been badly tortured” said the priest, perhaps distraught at the confidence he had placed in authorities in producing the young man.

We heard many other similar stories – some civil society leaders told us that a man had been shot just in front of the guest house we were staying. We also heard even a district judge had received threatening calls.

### **Lack of protection mechanisms**

There was clearly a lack of protection mechanisms for civilians – the displaced, as well as the people of Mannar. We were told that “both the SLMM and Human Rights Commission function as information centres where an occasional complaint can be recorded, they never intervene and investigate. Most of the time, people are scared to even complaint to these offices and police, and they have no confidence in them”

### **What lies ahead for the displaced and people of Mannar?**

Hope of being able to live in dignity and security seems furthest from the people of Mannar. Livelihoods, specially fishing, and travel is being heavily restricted.

Those displaced in the name of their own liberation yearn to go home, but have no hope that they will be allowed to go home soon.

Will their desperate cries ever be heard and heeded in the rest of the country, by elected representatives and civil servants, and people of goodwill?

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