

Reflections from Trincomalee town and Mutur

General situation

Trincomalee remains heavily militarized and tense. In the short stretch of around 85km between Habarana and Trincomalee, the bus I traveled was stopped at five checkpoints, where we had to get down with all our bags and walk a few hundred meters in the hot sun. Consideration was extended though to older people and women with children. Almost at every checkpoint, Tamil passengers were singled out for intense checking and questioning. After 7pm, Trinco town was almost deserted and when I was returning after a gathering on a Saturday midnight, we didn't encounter any vehicle on the roads.

While I was in Mutur, a man had been shot dead in Karikamunai, in the Eechchilampathu division, where several displaced people had come back to resettle. Local people told me he was member of the Karuna group.

According to the Human Rights Commission's (HRC) Trincomalee office, abductions and disappearances continue to be reported almost on a daily basis – 24 had been reported in August and 39 in September. "We are also told of other cases, but these are not included as no formal complaint is made – many people don't complaint to us or the Police due to fear of reprisals" said one official. Abuses by the TMVP (Karuna faction) also continue to be reported, but I heard that their strength seems to be dwindling; they now have two offices in Trincomalee, while they had about 10 offices before. Every week, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) has been reporting incidences of killings, abductions and arrests from the Trincomalee district.

One issue that was highlighted by several people was the inability to obtain death certificates to several people killed in shelling in Kadiravelly, near Vakaraai, in 2006. This has also made it impossible for family members to obtain relief and compensation. Although several agencies seemed aware of this, there has been no satisfactory response to the family members after more than a year.

The HRC seems to monitor the situation and intervene on some violations, including abuses by non state actors, but it doesn't seem to have a significant impact. In the case of three high profile cases (Killing of 5 students in Jan. 2006, killing of 17 aid workers of ACF in Aug. 2006 and killing of Buddhist Monk, Ven. Nandarathna Thero) in Trincomalee district, the HRC had made its own investigations and submitted a report to its headquarters in Colombo. Progress had apparently come to a standstill at that point. The IDP Unit in the HRC seemed up-to-date with information on the IDP situation and issues affecting IDPs. They had also been visiting IDP camps. But again, the level of strong interventions to protect and ensure IDPs' rights was not clear.

I felt sorry for the Police and Military offices at the checkpoints – standing for more than 8 hours daily, just checking bags is certainly not an occupation I will enjoy, with the fear of ambushes thrown in. A young police officer at a checkpoint told me: "We try to be considerate as possible to everyone – but it's a thankless job. Though the area is cleared, we live in fear of attacks by LTTE cadres – I'm only staying on this job because I have a daughter going to school and have to support her, and when I'm doing duty here, at least I get more additional allowances than what I got in Matale, where I served before."

Thousands still live as displaced people – some in camps and some with relatives and friends. I had the chance to interact with several people in camps around Trinco town, as well as in the interiors of Mutur. It's impossible for me to fully capture their apprehensions and aspirations, but below are some that struck me.

Terror and fear in the transit camps:

"Whenever there is firing in the jungles behind the camp, the military takes revenge on us, maybe because we are helpless. On 26th September, 26 people were beaten up by the military, including a pregnant woman. When I tried to intervene, they beat me also," said one lady describing the fear of people in the transit camp at Paddithidal. A petition signed by more than 150 people in the camp had been handed over to the ICRC and the Human Rights Commission, but the intimidation continues. "We are a scared to go out and do any casual job, as we might be arrested in round ups by the military" a young man told me. Round ups are also regular inside the camp. The military had threatened people that if one soldier is killed in any incident, they will take revenge on the people in the camp, repeatedly referring to the massacre of more than 20 Tamil civilians in 1996 in nearby Kumarapuram.

In September, the Grama Sewaka in charge of the nearby Manalchchenai transit camp had been shot dead in the night. One person told me that it was likely because of his involvement in supporting the attempt to petition the Supreme Court on the loss of homes due to the Sampoor High Security Zone.

"Everyday, 2-3 families are moving out due to fear. Already, about 15 families have left" said a camp leader.

Temporary Identity cards instead of National Identity Cards

Several people also expressed fear about a "Temporary ID card" issued to displaced people by the Police. This had been issued to people who already have National Identity Cards (NICs) issued by the Central government, as well as people who didn't have their NICs. They feared that the identity card could be used for round up of people by Police and security forces. "The military always try to harass us, thinking we are LTTE supporters because we lived in areas that were

controlled by the LTTE. This ID card will help them to single us out,” said one man, whose 17 year old son had been taken in on suspicion. “Why can’t they accept the NIC issued by the government? And can’t they put the effort and resources they are putting to make this ID cards to get NICs for those who don’t have one?” asked one person. I had no answer. I was also shocked to see that the ID singles out Tamils, through a reference to “race”, which is not even disclosed in the NIC.

Fear of losing traditional lands and homes due to the High Security Zone:

There was no official figure of the number that would permanently lose their traditional lands and homes due the establishment of the High Security Zone in Sampoor by the government. According to statistics I got from the Human Rights Commission, 15,425 people from 11 Grama Niladhari Divisions, who are presently in camps and with relatives will be affected, while most of the displaced still in Batticaloa (11,672 as of September) will also be losing their lands. NGOs working with displaced people in camps put a higher figure, with one mentioning that 53,000 would be affected.

“The military brought took us from the camps in Batticaloa, telling we will be taken home. I even left the pots and pans given by an NGO because we believed we were going home. Instead, we were brought here, to another camp. Then we were told we will be taken home in a few days. Now, we hear our lands and homes have been taken over by the military for a High Security Zone, and that we will be settled in Ralkuly. We will never go there (Ralkuly) – it’s not a suitable place to live,” a 62 year old man at the Killiveddy transit camp told me.

“Please tell the government not to built houses for us in Ralkuly, we will not go there, so better not waste money. I will drink poison if they take me forcibly,” another man told me.

What is striking is that no government official had thought of informing or consulting the affected people directly about their fate. “More than any assistance, we want to go home – if we can go back to our homeland in Sampoor, we can live on our own, without depending on government or NGOs,” another woman told me.

Facilities in camps

Its not only fear that’s making life in transit camps unbearable to people living there. In the two major transit camps established by the government (Killiveddi and Paddiththidal), people told me that toilets are full and that they are unable to use them anymore. In these camps, people seemed to get food rations. But several people I met in the Cultural Hall close to Trincomalee town told me that the only food they get is a half a loaf per person, from an NGO. Government assistance had stopped long ago, and I was told that it’s not possible to find regular work.

Insecurity and restrictions in areas to be resettled:

I visited Ralkuly, the place where the government plans to resettle the people of Sampoor, crossing the river on a small boat rowed by a young boy. Several people I spoke to there said that they will welcome others to come and settle if they would like to come. I learnt from government servants that clearing of the jungle and building of houses had already started. But it seemed insecure. A man had been killed by shelling, which according to local villages was by the government forces on 24th September. A 63 year old woman told me how she had been injured in that incident, and took me to her kitchen to show a gaping hole made by the shelling. Villages told that the three children and wife of the man killed are finding it difficult to survive without any income. There has been no compensation of any sort, neither has there been any inquiry into this incident.

Even in this area, security restrictions affect day to day life difficult for civilians. “Due to the restrictions on fishing the price of fish these days is about Rs. 500- 600, whereas before, it was around Rs. 50” a women in Ralkuly told me.

Lost livelihoods:

Thaqwa Nagar is a predominant Muslim fishing community, close to the jetty in Mutur. The severe restrictions imposed on fishing by the military are causing untold hardships to the people there. The day before I went there, Friday 2nd Nov., fishing had totally banned by the military, without any reason. On days that fishing is allowed, it is subject to a series of restrictions. Fishing is allowed beyond 2kilometers from the shore. “Its impossible to get a good catch so near the shore, and the best time for fishing is the night, not daytime” another fisherman told me. Engine boats are not allowed. Walking on the beach, I saw the sad sight of imposing engine boats turned upside down. Others were being used as garbage dumps and some were slowly rotting way.

Fishing can only be done with a permit valid for 3 months. This permit has to be surrendered to a military checkpoint each time they go fishing, and to be collected on return. The registering point opens only at 4am, so in effect, only very few fishermen can actually go out to sea by 4am. To add further insult, the form for obtaining the permit is only in Sinhalese and almost no one understands Sinhalese in this community.

“Yesterday, we were not allowed to fish at all. Today, I went out around 5am and came back empty handed. That happens on many days. If I’m lucky, I could get Rs. 200-300 worth of fish” One fisherman told me. That’s the story of all the fishermen I talked to in Thaqwa Nagar.

“We Muslims didn’t like the LTTE. Many of us voted for the present President. But during the time LTTE controlled this area, they didn’t impose this type of restrictions on us. Government that we voted in claims they liberated us – but we are

suffering more than before. Fishing is allowed in Trincomalee. Why only impose these difficulties on us?” one fisherman questioned. “We don’t want any assistance – fishing is the only job we know – it’s been so for generations. If we’re allowed to fish, we don’t need any assistance from anyone” was a sentiment I heard several times.

Paddy farms bulldozed by a new highway

As I traveled the interiors of Mutur, I heard more stories of desperation. Before reaching Eechchilampathu, I came across a massive new road being built across the A15 road (Mutur – Eravur) bisecting the paddy fields. I learnt later that this new road was to link Kantalai to Sampoor, the high security zone area. A bulldozer was visible and nearby was some military personnel. “I’ve lost a large part of my paddy farms, and so has my cousin. I might lose as much as Rs. 75,000 per harvest because of this” was what I heard when I stopped and chatted with a farmer. No one had informed him, neither had there been any offers or discussions of compensation. “We are Tamils, so we can’t complain. We live in fear, and if we try to complain, we might even be killed” he told me. Talking to another farmer on the field, I learnt that about 50 farmers will lose their paddy lands, including Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims.

Restrictions on quarrying

In Jinna Nagar, Mutur, one of the main means of livelihood had been breaking stones. After being displaced and coming back, people here had resumed their traditional job of breaking stones. But in September, a group of Buddhist Monks had turned up, and asked them to stop, saying a Buddhist statue had been in the site. Mutur Police had threatened that they would arrest if they continue working. “We don’t want to damage any Buddhist statue – but we have to continue our job, otherwise, how can we feed our children?” asked one man. The Monks had promised to give some food, but they had never received any. Since then, the area where breaking stones was allowed had been restricted, severely affecting their income. “More than 60 of us handed over a letter to the Government Agent, Divisional Secretary and other officials, asking to reconsider this, but they have not told us anything yet” another villager told us. When I asked whether they wanted to convey any message to people in Colombo and elsewhere, the response was, “Tell people in Colombo and authorities there is no liberation – we are only experiencing more and more hardships.”

Buddhist statue

In Illangeturai, we heard that a shrine where Hindus have been worshipping is being slowly converted into a Buddhist worship place. “Military don’t allow us to go there, but there are many Sinhalese visitors who are allowed to go, and they even bathe in the sea and enjoy themselves,” I heard from two nearby villages – one in Kallady and another in Muthuchennai.

Lost property

Many people who had fled as fighting broke out came back to find their houses damaged and property missing. Many I spoke to said they had lost electronic items such as TVs and motorbikes. “When we came back, our house and bakery were destroyed. We saw our car is in a nearby army camp, we have the relevant documents, but despite several requests it’s still not being returned to us” said one woman, mother of five children.

Almost all the people I spoke to asked me not to mention their names – they feared reprisals if their names were mentioned. An exception was the woman injured in a shelling incident in September in Ralkuly, who asked me to take her picture near the small whole made by the shell, in her makeshift kitchen.

The visit was full of despair and questions that I could not answer and assurances I could not give, about people being able to go back home, being able to engage in their livelihoods, physical security etc. I could only promise them I will tell their stories to the rest of the country and rest of the world.

Will their desperate cries be heard by authorities and people of goodwill?

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