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CIVILIANS & THE JAFFNA OFFENSIVE

Civilian Casualties:

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A recent evacuee from Jaffna described the situation thus:

"You cannot look at the expressions on the faces of the people- staring eyes, frozen with fear. No one talks any sense. The continuous noise of shells is unbearable. There are wild stories going around about atrocities of the army in recently captured areas with no way of verifying them. People do not want to take chances. They have lost their ability to think and act. For many years we have been treated like sheep and now we are behaving like sheep. Only the survival instinct works. It is maddening. There was an aerial attack near where I was staying. I was told that several people had been killed. I did not go to look. I did not wish to know more. Few in fact know with any accuracy. Had I remained two more days I would have gone mad. I left Jaffna with my family, crossed the lagoon and brought them to Killnohchi."

A large number of people leaving Jaffna and moving into very difficult conditions in Thenmaratchi, having frequently quit their homes under pouring rain, has received publicity worldwide.

In the meantime the LTTE had launched a series of massacres on largely unprotected Sinhalese villages close to the border of the Eastern Province. Among the hundred or so killed indiscriminately at close range were many women and children.

The LTTE had made it clear in a variety of ways that it wanted people to quit Jaffna. On 30th October the LTTE made a loudspeaker announcement in Jaffna in which it stated: "No one must take this announcement lightly. We are doing battle intensely and bravely with a demonic force. It will attack us from several directions. We too will respond likewise. Since we are going to resist every inch against a state drunk with racism, you people must evacuate this same night and leave for Thenmaratchi and Vadamaratchi". When questioned later by Jaffna Hospital authorities, a key LTTE leader said that whoever announced had not said that it was the LTTE, but stated that those staying may not be able to leave as the periphery of the ICRC zone would be mined by them, in the event of either party breaking the "agreement". Elsewhere masked LTTE cadre went to houses and acted intimidatingly. There were also a large number of refugees at John Bosco school next to the ICRC. Here the LTTE fired a kind

of shells, which people thought were rubber shells, at the refugee camp to force their evacuation.

Some of the other main causes for the exodus however are all-too-evident in the attitudes of the Sri Lankan Government and the actions of its armed forces. These had failed to provide any tangible reassurances to the people of Jaffna that the Government was duty bound to provide. The official military spokesman claimed on 2nd November that there had been at best 10 unconfirmed civilian deaths, dismissing the figures given by Government Agent/Jaffna. President Kumaratunge in a television address a little earlier again minimised civilian casualties and claimed that the military operation had been highly successful. But aerial attacks have taken place and shells have fallen far away from areas of actual fighting, and civilians were forced to flee after hurriedly burying the dead. The Government claimed to be attacking LTTE targets and asked civilians to keep away from such places. Where are then such safe places when even refugees camping in temporary shelter on the outskirts of Jaffna were attacked? The experience of the people is of fear and devastation. If targeted aerial attacks were a fiction earlier, the claims now are totally unsustainable. The LTTE's unconscionable massacre of Sinhalese civilians along the Eastern border had also no doubt added to the fear among civilians of reprisals by the armed forces.

If anything, the Government is fooling itself with denials behind a mask of censorship which few others believe. Indeed, the censorship has contributed to the Government's conduct which lacks evidence of the civilians having featured in any significant way in its thinking. Although little is known of the situation in areas under control of the army, the indications are that strict instructions have been given to the security forces to be sensitive to civilian interests. The overall military operation has however been very dependent on intense shelling and unwarranted bombing. Against this, instructions given to the soldiers to be on their best behaviour become meaningless, since the effective thrust of the operation is to drive the people away from their homes and villages. [\[Top\]](#)

Civilian Casualties:

For the month of October this was placed at 104 killed and 194 injured by the Government's administrative machinery in Jaffna. The breakdown is as follows:

Date	Dead	Injured
4th Oct	22	90
17th	6	15
18th	20	23
26th	10	10
30th	46	56
Total	104	194

The dates refer to the date of receipt of report and the figures record the progress of the army from Atchuvely to Kopay. These figures are generally conservative and are lower than those

given by civilians leaving the area, since they are mostly based on claims by families for government relief.

Figures given by other agencies (eg. NGOs) may differ in some detail according to the source (eg. Jaffna Teaching Hospital) and time of record. The ten killed on the 26th were sheltering in a coconut estate in Ariyalai, in the eastern extremity of Jaffna town, 5 miles from the combat zone. They were victims of an aerial attack at 7.00 A.M. First reports placed the number killed at 20 to 30.

The 46 reported on the 30th were civilians killed on the 29th when there was intense fighting between the SL Army and the LTTE for the control of Neervely, six miles from the Jaffna town centre. Shells fired by the army from early morning reached the edge of Jaffna's municipal limits 2 miles from the centre, particularly about the Nallur market area along Pt Pedro Road. Civilians had to flee in pouring rain. Most civilian casualties however occurred in aerial attacks six to nine miles from the scene of fighting.

Of the 46 recorded by the government administration, 42 were killed in aerial attacks and 4 in artillery shelling- 30 in Anaikkottai, 12 in Chavakacheri and 4 in Kokkuvil.

Other sources accounted for several among those killed in aerial attacks on the same day. One witness was near the area when rockets fired by Puccaro aircraft hit Potpathy Road in Kokkuvil quarter of a mile from the University of Jaffna. The number killed were reported as six including an unidentified old lady. He had helped to bury the pieces of 'mangled flesh'. Other sources said that the rockets fell either on or near an LTTE camp - one among many interspersed among civilian dwellings. The Roman Catholic parish priest in Anaikkottai reported 14 killed (two sisters (ages 8, 10), two boys (7,12), girl (14), three women (25, 26, 30) and six others). Koolavady, Manipay-5 dead, 10 injured. At Navalay near the Catholic Welfare Centre- 1 girl(15) killed and 4 boys injured. At Chavakacheri missiles fired from the air hit houses opposite the old police station. 12 were killed including an old lady after admission to hospital. All were refugees, some bodies were in pieces and two remained unclaimed. All these incidents took place in the morning. The discrepancies between reports are mainly due to the circumstances of the sources and the demarcation of areas.

On Wednesday 31st October bombs were aimed at Chemmani bridge just before Navtkuli on the Jaffna-Kandy Road along which civilians were streaming towards Chavakacheri. Two civilians were killed. Other sources said that it is difficult to put a number on those killed at Anaikkottai on the 29th since several bodies remained unidentified at that time.

During breaks in the rain clouds, the aircraft were seen as small specks at a distance whose sound was barely heard. The sound was heard as the aircraft swooped down, followed by a 'flash of lightning and a boom of thunder', with the aircraft keeping well outside the range of a possible missile attack. Even during the 80s when Sia Machetti aircraft used to dive low to attack, it was mainly civilian dwellings that were hit.

One might add that for the first time in the civil war, casualties among the civilians were not just less than those among combatants, but were less than a seventh of number among the latter. The main reason for this is not any initiative on the part of the Government, but because the civilians traumatised again and again simply moved out en masse. Had the Government thought a little about them, much of the death and suffering could have been avoided. [\[Top\]](#)

Refugees:

From about the 20th of October those already in refugee camps began leaving Jaffna. They were mainly people from Valikamam North and the Islands who had been refugees for 3 years or more after their areas came under army control. They were given free transport by the LTTE across Jaffna Lagoon to Killinochchi. These are people over whom the LTTE has exercised patronage by becoming the effective channel of all relief, as among displaced populations in the Wannu areas. Those seeking refuge in the Wannu are among the poorest.

Then came others who were required to show a receipt to prove that they had made the contribution recently demanded for the LTTE's national defence fund, before being allowed to cross Jaffna Lagoon. Several others moved to Chavakacheri 9 miles east of Jaffna and to refugee camps in Thenmaratchi, often on foot or on bicycles. These were mainly people displaced recently with little hope of returning to their homes or even finding them other than as rubble. Many of those last remaining in Jaffna were those still having some modest property to go back to.

By 29th October those remaining in Jaffna had moved to schools and places of refuge close to their homes. Among these are the ICRC protected Jaffna Teaching Hospital Zone. Other places of local refuge were Jaffna Railway Station, St.Patrick's College, St.John's College, Chundikuli Girls's College, Nallur Kandasmy Kovil area, University of Jaffna and several other schools and places of worship in these areas. The University had about 5000 persons. Kandasamy Kovil and precincts formed the largest refugee concentration during the October 1987 Indian Army advance into Jaffna. People living north of Adipatham Road in Kokkuvil, Kondavil and beyond had either quit their homes or did not spend the nights in them. On first November Jaffna Hospital was functioning with the medical staff and patients totalling about 200. Reports received a few days later suggested that the movement out of Jaffna had increased after the LTTE announcement referred to earlier. Messages had been received for the Government to be informed that a number of people are remaining in schools and places of worship. NGO sources placed the number remaining in Jaffna at about 50 000.

A report giving the situation on 3rd November quoting NGOs put the figures at 73 000 new refugees in the Chavakacheri area (Thenmaratchi AGA Division) & 25 000 families waiting to cross Jaffna Lagoon into Killinochchi. A government administration report on 6th November placed the number of peninsular refugees in Killinochchi at 110 000 of whom 70 000 were new arrivals. Taking the normal population of Vadamaratchi and Thenmaratchi to be 300 000, that leaves a further 100 or 200 thousand. They would either be old refugees or persons not accounted for.

The latest reports say that only a few doctors remain in Jaffna Hospital. Patients had little choice but to be evacuated to very crowded conditions in Chavakacheri Hospital which was only a base hospital. The beds were reserved for LTTE patients and civilians were forced to take the floor. Among those refugees forced to leave Jaffna, many elderly and infirm were seen sitting on the roadsides as if they could not move any further. Some seemed lifeless and no one seemed to know who they were. Two LTTE high rankers were heard sharing a joke: "Give two months and the people would forget all this". [\[Top\]](#)

Relief supplies:

Both the Government and the LTTE have contributed to the problems of civilians in Jaffna over several years. But the responsibility for relief has fallen on the Government while the LTTE had not made matters easier by insisting on keeping closed the trunk road to Jaffna through Elephant Pass. There are difficulties in sea borne deliveries arising from the weather and docking facilities. The tendency has been to blame the Government exclusively whenever there was a crisis in Jaffna, without any reference to the fact that the LTTE has compounded civilian suffering for political and military gain without any acknowledgement of responsibility for the people.

At present three ships ply between Trincomalee and Jaffna carrying supplies that are handed over to the Government Agent after being unloaded at the improvised pier at Pt Pedro. There are sometimes breaks in schedules due to technical problems such as unavailability of labour in Trincomalee on certain days or due to other disruptions such as the hijacking of the passenger vessel Irish Moana by the LTTE and the recent attack on the petroleum installation in Colombo. A total of 96,500 tonnes of supplies were scheduled for delivery in Jaffna as agreed to between GA/Jaffna and the Ministry of Rehabilitation. The delivery was due to have been completed by October-end before the North-East monsoon set in. But only 58 000 tonnes had been delivered by October-end and deliveries are continuing into the monsoonal weather.

The Government too has at times opened itself to accusations of being grudging and vindictive when it should have been seen to be going extra lengths in showing concern for the very deprived people of Jaffna. Following the LTTE attack on the petroleum installation, apparently citing a shortage of fuel, the Government Agent/ Jaffna was asked to leave behind a part of the kerosene purchased and taken to Trincomalee for shipment to Jaffna. The matter was resolved after he argued his case and lobbied through concerned persons in the South.

For the last year or so the relief supplies reaching Jaffna are placed by Government sources at 30 to 40% of what is required. For the poor this has often meant missing meals. The recent rise in the refugee population has made matters significantly worse.

Salient features of the military operation:

- 1.No change of practice regarding the use of aerial bombing and shelling. Despite well-known absurdities and fiction, there has been no reassessment based on past experience.*
- 2.The rejection of reliable information about civilian casualties has shown a continuing lack of sensitivity to civilian voices.*
- 3.No clear strategy to give confidence to the people through tangible practical measures such as providing at the outset safe areas and procedures. No contingency plans for possible outcomes of the operation and no clearly thought-out policy towards civilians.*
- 4.No proper mobilisation of NGO and government machinery to coordinate relief work and provide food and shelter for civilians in anticipation of different scenarios.*

5. Censorship and the barring of journalists from the war zone has effectively shown that the Government is prepared to negate the interests of civilians for short term military gain.

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The humanitarian crisis

For the moment at least the humanitarian crisis has overshadowed totting up scores of LTTE and army casualties. It is partly a crisis engineered by the LTTE and in part one arising out of Government negligence and even callousness. Whether the number is 200, 400 or 500 thousand is not the main issue. It is true that large numbers have lost their homes, been turned out in inclement weather and live in utter want. It is true that children have died of exposure who would otherwise be living.

In a BBC Tamil Service interview, a key government official described how a weary woman who had crossed Jaffna Lagoon had asked for four plain-teas with poison for herself and her children. Such instances are often dramatised for propaganda against the Government. But anyone familiar with Jaffna would know that it is a subtle indictment of both sides by those rendered helpless and disillusioned. That is the state of mind among the people.

The initial wrong-headed decision to impose censorship has led the Government step by step to a position where it cannot rationally face up to the humanitarian crisis. The apparent decision on 7th November to suspend GA/Jaffna was a symptom of it. The priority of the Government should have been to address the problem rather than quarrel with GA/Jaffna about technicalities and figures. By making this an issue, so much is being sacrificed, and in particular the political process initiated for which the Government has duly received credit.