

Tamil Refugee



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EDITORIAL

Dear Subscriber,

We indicated in April that we would publish a special issue to set out the escalation of the refugee problem in the Tamil Homeland. But the "Operation Liberation" by the Sri Lankan Government started on the 26th May and the consequent offensive has imposed greater urgency on the developments in the Jaffna peninsula. We are publishing a report on the consequences of the offensive.

The estimate of the death toll in Vadamarachi is about 800. Most of the people in Vadamarachi are displaced and quite a number have fled the area. While most of the refugees moved to other areas within the peninsula some have moved out to Vavuniya district and even to Colombo for safety. Refugees have also reached India.

There was acute food shortage following the offensive and urgent relief was needed. India has taken steps to bring some relief but much more relief is required and it is hoped that others too would come forward to give assistance.

It is reported that the next phase of the "Operation Liberation" is imminent. It is feared that most of the people in the peninsula may be trapped in an area of about 100 square miles which will result in the displacement of about 500,000 people in the peninsula. It is also feared that the operation could endanger the lives of thousands of Tamils.

10th July.

EDITOR

THE 'OPERATION LIBERATION' OF VADAMARACHI FROM 26/5/87 TO 3/6/87 AND OF ATCHUVELI FROM 5/6/87 TO 9/6/87. AND THE HUMAN TRAGEDY OF THE PEOPLE OF JAFFNA

The above operation by the state forces was the climactic point of the fuel embargo policy of the government which commenced at the beginning of the year, with its attendant restrictions on the inflow of food, medicine, firewood and other things which, it was thought, should not be made freely available within the peninsula. This operation which was very much discussed in the international media as impending since the beginning of May, was preceded by an aerial attack on Suthumalai, Manipay on May 25th and was launched on May 26th.

By the time this operation was started, the food situation in the peninsula had already worsened to starvation levels at the level of the poorer sections of the community. The shortage of fuel had led to a fall in agricultural production, thereby creating worse difficulties for the agricultural workers. There was also a spiralling of prices which began to affect even the better-off sections of the community. Fishing had virually come to a standstill. By mid-April, it was a common feature sight to see some families having only one meal a day. The children were the worst hit.

The health situation had already worsened dramatically. With the threat of the closure of the Teaching Hospital at Jaffna, the only major hospital catering to the needs of the entire North, which had inadequate staff and supply, the health situation became bad. Shelling of the hospital led to panic among patients. The base hospitals at Point Pedro (Manthikai) and Tellipallai did not have the basic amenities to attend to patients. The network of Primary Health Centres which attended to most of the problems of rural health had completely collapsed.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE 'OPERATION LIBERATION'

The 'operation liberation', now viewed retrospectively, could be seen to have been undertaken in two phases - the first one was the occupation of Vadamarachi, and the second the extension of army authority upto Atchuvveli in the East, to Maviddapuram in the West, thus attempting to have KKS Harbour, Palaly Airport and Thondamanaru camp within one geographically contiguous unit, and also to control the entire coastal belt from Karainagar to Manalkadu.

"OPERATION LIBERATION"

The occupation of Vadamarachi had been handled in such a manner that the severity of its impact and the human cost of its execution - both in terms of loss of lives and displacement of people - had never been known outside, not even at the national level.

The operation started at 5.45 am on 26th May. The announcement of the curfew came over the national media only at noon, by which time at least Jaffna town and Velvettithurai had already been bombed for seven hours. The leaflets announcing the 2 hour "grace" for people to rush to places of safety and the names of the places (temples and schools) to which they should go were dropped in Vadamarachi only around 9 am. The bombing had been continuous and uninterrupted.

It was announced later on 27th May that the operation would be confined to Vadamarachi, the North-Eastern coastal strip from the Jaffna lagoon to Kudatanai. Manalkadu on the East, encompassing Kerudavil, Thondamanaru, Point Pedro, Puloli, Karaveddi, Alvai, Udupidy, Valvetty, Navindil, Thunnalai, Karanavai. This area has, besides the toiling peasantry, a very large number of coastal fishermen; also a number of under-privileged groups.

In the Atchuveli phase, Pathamany, Idaikkadu, Vallalai were the targets of attack.

The operation took place in the following manner:

There was the initial aerial bombardment followed by the moving up of the army by land, which culminated in establishing mini camps at strategic points, thus sealing off Vadamarachchi from the rest of the peninsula. In the case of Atchuveli phase, the effort was obviously to get the land corridor from Thondamanaru to Palaly airport cleared.

The attack proper consisted of:

1. Throwing of tar barrel bombs from air planes.
2. Aerial bombing proper.
3. Helicopter strafing - sometimes shells were also thrown from helicopters.
4. Cannon Shelling by advancing army units along with the shelling from the camps.

NAPALM BOMB - SRI LANKAN VERSION

A word of explanation is necessary about the tar-barrel bombs. Oil drums of 35-45 gallon capacity filled with tar and with cut rubber pieces, soft and velvety were unrolled from a not-so-fast-moving Avro plane. As the bomb touches the ground it explodes, catches fire, throws out the petroleum product inside on objects which are close by. The rubber pads stick on and burn to the end. This caused heavy damage to animal and human life. The flora too was affected.

In terms of the attack, the worst-affected area in the Vadamarachchi phase was the area from Kambarmalai to Nelliady, along the Udupidy-Navindil Road and Velvettithurai to Point Pedro along the coastal road.

An important aspect of this operation was the announcement over Radio Jaffna (this was an activation of the medium wave transmission in Jaffna which was stopped for some time) that people should seek shelter at specified temples and schools.

Even though no bombing-free time was given for this shift, people began to rush to these places during the brief intervals when the attacks were not so intensive. In some places the specified place was far off and people began to congregate at the nearest temples and schools.

It was a pity that some temples had been targets of attack - shelling and bombing. At Alvai Muthumariamman Temple about 37 people died from shelling and at Nelliady Murugaiyar Temple the death toll was 2. At Koilkadavai in Thunnaiai, the shells fired at 12.30 am and 2.30 am on two nights fell about 200 yards away from the temple. Another well-known incident was the bombing of the Jaffna Sivan temple (Vartheeswaran Temple).

It should be mentioned at this juncture that the bombing had been very indiscriminate. Though it was told that the aerial attacks were targetted on those buildings associated with the militants, in fact the bombing was very arbitrary and indiscriminate. In Valvettithurai the entire town was bombed and public places damaged. At Point pedro the market was bombed. At Kambarmalai and Valvetty, Polikandy, huts were bombed.

THE NET EFFECT ON THE CIVILIAN POPULATION

DEATHS

Deaths have been mainly of three types:

1. Those due to shelling - shelling takes the people by surprise. Shells fall miles away from where they are fired and hit unguarded unsuspecting people. It took place normally at night time and occasionally during early afternoon when there was a lull in the aerial bombardment.
2. Deaths due to the firing by the advancing army. Special mention should be made of the many deaths that have taken place in the hamlets of Kottawattai and Sakalawattai. It was seen that the advancing army had been firing indiscriminately in this area killing a large number of people. As many of the people of these villages had already run off for safety to other villages, the intensity was not known. These deaths were not discovered until some of them trekked back to the villages three days later to find out the whereabouts of relatives who had been left behind or who did not join them. Bodies were found scattered at various spots in the compounds of the houses and had to be burnt at the very spots they were found. No obsequies were observed in the disposal of bodies. Such was the situation in Valvetty, Udupidy as in these two villages.

3. Deaths of the old and the infirm. It was tragic that many of the people who could not be taken along with the fleeing crowd had to be left either in bunkers or other safe places. A substantial number of these people succumbed to death and in Valvettithurai area alone about one half of the over 65 population is no more.

It was tragic that the bunkers dug for emergency shelter in many of the houses turned out to be death-traps in many cases, especially when the bunkers were not well constructed. In some places, when the entry/exit point was covered with sand thrown up due to the bombing in nearby spots the bunkers became graves, especially if those inside were old and infirm.

~~It is also true that the advancing soldiers engaged in cordon and search operations were harsh on those who had built bunkers. Earlier at Vallalai some persons who were inside a bunker were pulled out and shot dead.~~

As it stands now, one can only give a rough estimate of the deaths at Vadamarachchi. Many are yet missing. Only when all the people get back to their houses would it be possible to ascertain the exact loss. At present it would not be less than 650.

As for the Atchuveli phase, the operation was more limited in scope and the number of dead was around 50. It is not possible to give an accurate figure relating to the injured because it was not possible to rush everyone to Manthikai, the only hospital that was functioning in Vadamarachchi. Transport was not available and quite often the injury was so severe that much bleeding has taken place before the patient was taken to the hospital. Of the injuries the worst was loss of limbs.

PROPERTY DESTROYED OR DAMAGED

As for property damage, it had been fairly wanton in specified areas where the operation was intensive as in Valvettithurai and Point Pedro where virtually all public buildings have been damaged or rendered unusable. Many people have left their houses which have often been burnt or bombed. Of these people who have lost their houses are many people who live in huts. The total number of huts damaged thus would be at least 1000. Larger, well-built houses are excluded from this estimate.

RANDOM ARREST

The additional calamity that affects the people of Vadamarachchi was Arrests done at those places (temples and schools) where people were asked to come for shelter. At most of these places which happened to have larger concentrations of refugees, all males from 15 to 35 were asked to line up and it is said that on signals given by hooded informers, were taken in for detention. In certain places no one was released. The number arrested thus is about 4000.

THE FOOD SITUATION

There is a major food crisis now at Vadamarachchi. This does not mean that the rest of the peninsula is in any better position; it is that the army operations have heightened the problem in Vadamarachchi.

During the ten days of the operation many people were starving. Even the attempt made by some NGOs to provide 'kanji' (gruel) could not be well distributed as there was a big movement of people from village to village and there was a reluctance on the part of the people to stay in any one place. This was the situation on the third and fourth days. Most of the moving families did not have food and children had to live on unripe mangoes for some days.

FOOD DISTRIBUTION - SRI LANKAN ARMY STYLE

The army intervention in the food situation did not take place in any effective manner before the morning of 3/6. At the time it was announced over the national media on Monday (1/6) and Tuesday (2/6) that arrangement for relief work had been completed, not a single thing was done. Radio Jaffna announced on 1/6 that there would be a meeting at Girls' High School on 2/6. But when one of the AGAs and his staff went, the army sentry said he did not know anything about it. Later in the day another group of officials had to reach the army camps via another entry point around early afternoon.

What the army did on the 7th, 8th days was to force open most of the MPCs' stores and some of the authorised dealers' shops and ask the people to help themselves. This had struck at the very roots of the food distribution network. For one thing most of the food material had got into the hands of the more enterprising leaving the poor and needy hungry; it also led to grave shortage. ~~The distribution done at the various points by the forces does~~ not seem to have taken into account the needs of the families or the types of losses those affected have had. There is no evidence to say that the relief that is being provided by the army is coordinated with the civil authorities. The Government Agent around June 3rd contacted the NGOs in Jaffna and wanted their assistance to provide dry ration food packs. It was decided to obtain the lists from AGAs to facilitate the NGOs to pick them up and have in clusters meant for various areas. Till about the 12th June, lists were not forthcoming. The indiscriminate breaking open of the shops had led to a near food riot situation where normal distribution pattern is unable to be implemented. It is a pity that the system evolved by the Government Agent is not given clearance for implementation.

LACK OF SHELTER FOR REFUGEES

A major feature of the aftermath of this operation is that there have been not many refugee camps because people fear to stay in large numbers, as various places where people assembled were bombed and men arrested. They began to huddle in houses, in places which they thought were interior enough not to be disturbed by the army. In Karaveddi and Thunnalai an average house would have accommodated a hundred (100) each during the height of the tension. By a conservative estimate the total number of displaced people is not less than 100,000.

DISRUPTION OF EDUCATION

Education has been worsened because schools have been taken over for operational necessities by the army or for keeping some other refugees. It is important to note that some of the schools have also been damaged. The problem of education is very acute because many of the students of Vadamarachchi will not be able to sit for the GCE level examination which is to be held in mid-July. This calls for immediate action. It is estimated that more than 80,000 students of all levels are without classes in the whole of peninsula.

RELIEF ASSISTANCE

NGOs doing relief work will be called upon to give assistance for the following categories of people:

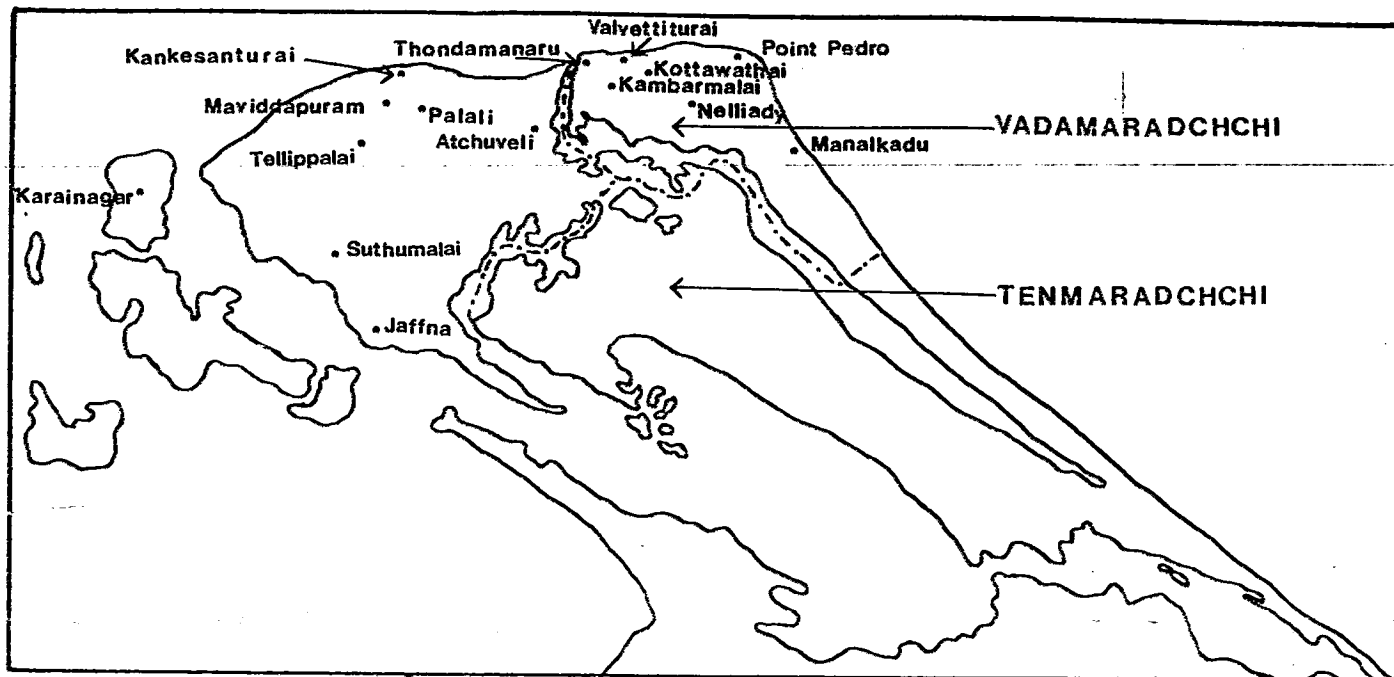
1. Those families which have lost their breadwinners.
2. Those who have been maimed and disabled, and their families.
3. Those who have become shelterless.
4. Those who have lost their basic possessions: clothing, cooking materilas etc.
5. Those who have lost their means of livelihood:
e.g those who lost their implements (farming and fishing) and those small shop keepers whose shops have been looted and burnt.

It is important that coordinated effort is taken to provide integrated relief.

EDITOR'S NOTE

1. This note has been prepared on the basis of the eyewitness accounts provided by human rights activists and relief workers immediately after the 'Operation Liberation' was completed.
2. Some of what is in this report was borne out by the UK ITN's "World in Action" TV program on Monday 29th of June 1987.

Jaffna Peninsula



JAFFNA PENINSULA

Area 400 sq. miles

Population 800,000

VADAMARADCHCHI DIVISION

Population 69,000

after "operation liberation",

Number of people displaced -37,000

Number of houses destroyed -2,000

Number of civilians killed -800

Number of civilians injured -4,000

** hundreds of women have been raped by the security forces.

The Day Of The 'Lions' (Jackals?)

At last, the Government has announced that Vadamarachchy area (the Northern-most and North Eastern portions of the Peninsula) had been brought under the rule of the 'Lions'.

Charred bodies, skeletons, and ruined buildings and houses were left in the "conquered land".

The operation was initially an air-borne one, comprising the services of helicopter gunships, 12 light aircrafts and three seaplanes. Security Forces from the camps of Valvettiturai, Point Pedro, Thondamanaru and Palaly, numbering about 3,500 were later pressed into service. Another division of equal number was on stand-by at the Palaly Army Camp pending orders in the event of a sudden necessity.

Light aircrafts began the carpet bombing of areas adjacent to the main road which links Valvettiturai and Point Pedro. On the very first day of the so-called "Operation Liberation", that was on 26th May, the bombings left more than 3000 houses and 100 business establishments in shambles. The exact number of the casualties could not be verified but some of the eye-witnesses who escaped the bombing and managed to come to Chavakachcheri told the SATURDAY REVIEW that more than 30 people were killed on that day alone.

Several gruesome stories of massacres are now emerging from the refugees who had made all their way through the barren lands of Varany in the nights and reached Kodikamam and Chavakachcheri.

Some of the refugees even dared to cross the Vallaiveli in the night and came to Jaffna.

On 30th May when the curfew was lifted from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. about 60 persons comprising men, women and children carrying white flags made their journey on foot from Point Pedro to Jaffna. An old woman said: "On the way" we saw the blood-curdling sight of 20 bodies without arms and legs on either side of the Vallai bridge. There was also the tell-tale marks of bulldozers close to this site".

The long trek and tales of woe were plenty. One would recall the old poem The charge of the light brigades which pertinently asks

"Theirs not to reason why
Theirs but to do and die".
People left their cherished possessions for a haven of refuge from the cruel onslaught.

They travelled light and by night—some through Varany and some through Vallai—because their only hope was to cling to dear life—the primordial human instinct.

There was no one to offer even a cup of cold water. Up to the boundary of Vadamarachchy, it was the story of the Deserted Land. The long journey to Thenmarachchy had sapped their energies to the fullest. They had no strength to make one step further.

Said one refugee:—"In keeping with the Government announcement which was repeatedly announced through 'Radio Jaffna' we took refuge in a temple. At that time we saw three bombers circling over head. Then suddenly there was a deafening sound. We fell to the floor. The bomb which had been actually aimed at the temple fell in the compound. Some of us escaped. But the others were not as lucky. 14 people who had taken refuge in the temple were killed. The injured were not able to receive first aid. I don't know what had happened to them".

75 people were bombed to death at the Muthumari Amman temple at Alvai on 29th May. More than 100 were injured. The injured could not be taken to the base hospital at Manthikai because the Security Forces had already occupied the hospital.

In another incident Uduppiddy Thachchapillaiyar temple and Nelliady Mootha Vinayagar temple were bombed. In all these temples the people had taken refuge and even hoisted a white flag on top of the Rajagopuram.

At Uduppiddy, a Multi-purpose Co-operative Stores and the market were bombed and later the Security Forces moved into Uduppiddy Girls' College and put up a mini camp. By that time the bombers had wreaked their havoc and left ruins in the vicinity, an 'all-clear' assurance of course.

All roads leading to Jaffna, Chavakachcheri and other exit points were blocked by Security Forces

either by a mini-camp or a make shift camp. From these camps were fired shells continuously from every direction.

The Nelliady Madhya Maha Vidiyalaya had been converted into a camp. From thence Security Forces armed also with swords and knives ventured on a killing spree. The late Tiger Leader, Pandithar's mother, was cut to death after identification. Similar fate met the late Sathianathan's (Shankar) family. The entire family—father, mother, sisters and brother—were reportedly made chopped meat.

In this sadistic orgy at least 80 people were killed. Among them were three newly-wed couples.

The week long operation by Security Forces sent thirty thousand people into Chavakachcheri and other areas as refugees. The refugees are continuing to pour into Jaffna—which itself is fast becoming a land of refugees. Several boat-loads of people have left for Rameshwaram.

"We have no jungles here to hide. Where can we go?" Such was the mournful cry of a middle-aged Government Servant which tugged at one's heart strings.

According to the official statistics released on 31st May, 29 soldiers had lost their lives in the current military operation, while 165 have been injured. On the Tamils' side, the Government said that 165 "terrorists" were killed and 437 "terrorists" injured or arrested. However, our statistics (not yet fully prepared) differs considerably. The Forces have lost three lieutenants, six 2nd lieutenants and 75 soldiers; 210 soldiers have been admitted to the Sri Jayewardene Hospital. Some of the injured Security personnel have been reportedly sent to Pakistan for medical attention.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have lost 13 of its cadres, while 20 from the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS) were said to be missing.

The civilian casualties exceed 270.

Avro

Rolls Out The Barrels On Temples

Avro—popularly known as the Barrel Bomber—rolled out several barrels—Sri Lanka's equivalent of napalm bombs—over the Jaffna Town area on Wednesday night (27th May), killing several people and setting ablaze a hut in Nallur, a shop down Manipay Road, and damaging Vannarponnai Sivan Kovil Mandapam, Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil and the vicinity of Vannai Perumal Kovil.

Just after the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation's newcast was over, round about 6-30 p.m. on Wednesday, the night raiders appeared in the skies: at least 3 bombers, a 'heli' and then the Barrel Bomber.

While the people huddled in makeshift trenches for over 1½ hours, the

raiders rained death and fire from the skies; bombs, rockets and the local napalm bombs.

The Avro dropped its special egg on a hut in a lane off Sankiliyan Veethi, Nallur razing it to the ground and scorching the crowns of a coconut tree and a palmyrah tree in the compound. Fortunately the people had earlier got into a trench close to the hut. But they had a time getting out of it when the hut started blazing away, because a 1½ month-old baby and an old man had to be hurriedly pulled out of the trench.

The Avro dropped its barrel bomb on the Vannai Sivan Kovil Mandapam, charring to death seven people who had taken refuge there and badly injuring several others. When

the barrel burst, the chemicals splashed onto nearby boutiques, gutting them completely.

The charred refugees had sought refuge in the Kovil Mandapam on the advice of the 'Jaffna Radio, (run by the Security Forces), which suddenly began transmissions on Tuesday morning (26th May) announcing an indefinite curfew. Leaflets were heli-dropped the previous day advising people to seek refuge in temples and schools.

Vannai Sivan Temple was founded by Sir Ponnampalam Ramanathan the great national leader, who braved the submarine-infested seas to go to Britain in 1915 to plead for justice for the Sinhalese who were at the receiving end of British oppression during the anti-Muslim riots.

The bomb dropped on Nallur Kandaswamy damaged a portion of the temple and injured 2 people.

This temple was originally built by Sapumal Kumarayya (a Tamil) who later became the King of Kotte (now Jayewardenapura, after President J. R. Jayewardene's Government came to Power in 1977).

The bombs aimed at Vannai Perumal Kovil just missed it, badly damaging 2 houses on either side of the temple.

The obvious conclusion one can draw from these bombing excursions is: Seek refuge in the Buddha; don't seek refuge in Hindu temples and Christian churches (St. Antony's Church, Manipay, was damaged by bombs dropped nearby on Monday (25th May)).