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Battered Jaffna on the brink of starvation

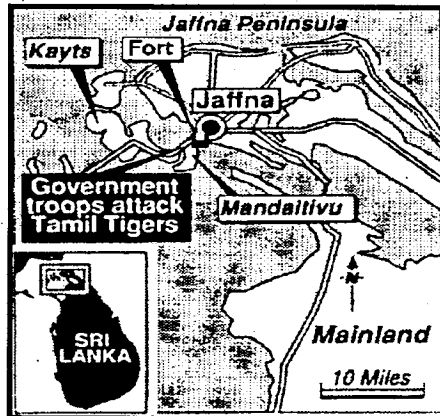
THE BELEAGUERED CITY of Jaffna after ten weeks under siege is on the edge of starvation as Sri Lankan soldiers encircle the peninsula and daily bombing runs inflict heavy civilian casualties.

Sri Lankan forces launched a new offensive on 22 August as 2,000 troops swept through the islands of Karaitivu and Kayts reportedly killing over 300 civilians. The advance was stemmed on the two-mile causeway from Mandaitivu to the Jaffna Fort, heavily mined by the Tigers. Local sources say 25 civilians killed on the causeway were used as human shields by the Army and over 7,000 people have taken refuge in Allaipitty school without food or water. The Army claims helicopter gunships killed 150 guerrillas at Kopay four miles north-east of Jaffna on their way to stiffen Tiger resistance on the causeway at Pannai Bridge but a LTTE spokesman in Paris denied the attack.

The Army offensive was intended to relieve the 17th century Jaffna Fort where over 200 security personnel have been under siege by Tamil Tigers (LTTE) since the war broke out on 11 June. The Fort is one of ten Army bases in the North-East ringed by Tamil guerrillas and while the Army has secured the main road through the North to Elephant Pass, rural areas a few miles east or west of the road remain fiercely contested.

The offensive followed three weeks of phoney peace while the Government and the LTTE exchanged counter proposals to set up a demilitarised zone around Jaffna. General hospital deserted after blanket aerial bombing around the Fort. During the discussions both sides kept up the pressure. The Sri Lanka air force attacked Manipay Green and Tellipalai hospitals and knocked out Chunnakam electricity generator plunging Jaffna into permanent darkness. The Tigers continued to lay siege to Jaffna Fort and in a concerted assault in early August they lost 28 cadres including six women.

A relief ship organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross



(ICRC), carrying 180 tons of food arrived at Point Pedro in early August and every week a small convoy of four or five lorries supplied by church organisations has braved the hazardous journey from Colombo to the peninsula. But observers say the Government's economic blockade is beginning to bite and there are stories of starvation and suicide.

Relief workers say the Government has allowed less than a week's food supply into the peninsula during the ten weeks of war. Jaffna has fall-back supplies of export crops such as beetroot and grapes and Muslim traders still run rice and kerosene into Jaffna by night across the lagoon at Pooneryn but the peninsula's 850,000 population has swollen to over a million with refugees fleeing the south and diarrhoea and scabies are now endemic. With banks closed, there is a serious cash flow crisis as food prices spiral. Severed North-East trading links have also reduced island-wide trade by 40%, another serious setback for the national economy.

Observers say that if the Sri Lankan army cannot tame the Tigers the Government means to starve the civilian population into submission. Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne advised Jaffna civilians in early August to leave the peninsula for a massive refugee complex at Vavuniya to let the Army launch a full-scale assault on Tiger positions. Critics say the Tigers already hold the civilian population hostage and are unlikely to let them leave. A Tiger

"Exit Visa" from the peninsula currently costs Rs10,000 (\$250) and no-one dare voice dissent over LTTE actions.

The Sri Lankan airforce continues to bomb the peninsula four or five times a day often using a single aircraft due to their limited resources. Bombing is both targeted and random in that pin-point accuracy is impossible with the feared "barrel bombs", a vicious cocktail of high octane fuel and scrap metal that sprays shrapnel across a one kilometre radius.

Helicopter gunships also prowl the air seeking moving targets since the Tigers monopolise most motorised transport. But private mini-buses and grain lorries still run the gauntlet and civilian casualties are around 15 people a day killed and 20 seriously wounded as both houses and vehicles are strafed and bombed.

More than 20 of Sri Lanka's opposition parties issued a joint statement in late August, calling for an immediate end to the indiscriminate killing of civilians in Jaffna, describing the aerial bombing as "an inhuman action". The Government's response was negligible apart from Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne reiterating that civilian casualties in a war situation were unavoidable. It is clear that the Sri Lankan military will not relinquish its air and sea domination for the sake of a few civilian casualties - especially when its ground forces continue to be held in check by a mere guerrilla outfit.

There is still speculation over whether the LTTE in the East jumped the gun in starting the war, given how unprepared the Tigers are for aerial attack in their Jaffna stronghold. The Tigers still lack Stinger missiles and effective anti-aircraft artillery which has caused them a loss of face with the local population as well as casualties from the air. But it is the civilian who is the ultimate loser and the most consistent casualty in this forgotten war.

Is Sri Lanka's South Sea Bubble economy about to burst?

At the crossroads or on the rocks?

AS SRI LANKA's military effort against militants in the North meets with mixed results, there is now a persistent clanking noise in the ear of the Government - the sound of the economy running down.

Eelam War Two is already on schedule to cost \$200 million and observers say the Army will have run out of money by November. Governments and international financial institutions have told Sri Lanka that the money to fight the war will be forthcoming - as long as it is a short war and that now seems unlikely.

The crisis in the Gulf over Iraq's annexation of Kuwait will cost Sri Lanka another \$400 million this year in lost remittances from 100,000 Sri Lankan workers in affected Arab countries, higher oil prices and lost tea exports. Sri Lanka remains noticeably ambivalent about UN sanctions against Iraq and two Sri Lankan ships have already been stopped in the Gulf trying to beat the blockade. Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne has publicly claimed exemption for Sri Lanka as "a poor Third World country".

Sri Lanka sent an urgent SOS to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in late August for immediate assistance with its balance of payments position which had staged a modest recovery in the first half of this year. But analysts say the Government has been slow to implement the IMF package to streamline the economy - apart from removing subsidies on basic foodstuffs which has badly hit the rural poor.

Sri Lanka's business sector, whether public or private is overmanned and undermanaged. A radical restructuring

is required critics say which would involve turning the island into an offshore tax haven for India's burgeoning economy and selling off Sri Lanka's 78 public corporations. Progress has still to be made in the privatisation of the Ceylon Transport Board (CTB) - one of the IMF's key requirements.

This would require a massive transformation of political will and an end to Sri Lanka's entrenched paranoia over India's political ambitions. There are sympathetic elements among India's present policy makers such as Arun Nehru and Foreign Secretary Dube, but the present Sri Lankan cabinet is unlikely to gamble on public goodwill.

To finance the war in the North the Government has little alternative but to print money which will set off a spiral of inflation that may bring the country to its knees. The Colombo Consumer Price Index, the official inflation barometer which has fluctuated between 14% and 22% this year, is regarded with derision by economic observers who say the true figure is already over 30%. Independent analysts have been known to clandestinely commission papers from key Finance Ministry officials to get at the real figures.

The annual World Bank meeting on Sri Lanka to be held in Paris in October is unlikely to offer more than moral support. Critics say it is little more than a shop window for foreign investment and less than half of the \$785 million pledged last year has materialised - mostly in public works projects rather than hard cash. Wherever the Sri Lankan economy is headed, it is in for a rough ride.

Suicide

Relief workers say refugees in the Kilinochchi area are close to starvation. Two children died in mid-August when a family of nine tried to commit suicide at Uthayanagar because of lack of food.

Hill Country killings

A family of five was abducted from Elkaduwa Estate near Katugastota on 17 August and their bodies recovered from a well at Malwahanne a few days later.

Fundraising

Sources in Hamburg say contributions of up to DM 1,000 (\$650) are being demanded from Germany's 35,000 Tamil refugees for the LTTE war effort. Refugees in Germany receive bed and board and a DM 250 monthly allowance.

Suspect death

A JVP suspect under interrogation leapt to his death from the top floor of Kandy police station on 18 August, police sources say.

Insufficient evidence

Sri Lanka's Attorney General ruled on 30 August that there was "insufficient evidence" to prosecute Senior Police Superintendent Ronnie Gunesinghe identified by Mrs Manorani Saravanamuttu as one of a group of men who abducted her son, journalist Richard de Zoysa found dead in February.

The impasse to peace

IN EARLY JULY, Sri Lanka's President added a tantalising footnote to his speech at a political rally in Puttalam. There could be no progress in peace-making with the Tigers, said Mr Premadasa, without the involvement of the international community.

Some saw this as a veiled threat to India if they attempted military intervention. Others believe it was a simple assurance that international observers would be present at any subsequent negotiations. But the war was then in its infancy and there is now a growing reluctance on both sides to admit that they face a mili-

tary stalemate and to resume discussions.

Human Rights NGOs in Colombo, in a series of meetings in August with Government ministers, called for an immediate ceasefire and mediation by a UN Special Representative.

They also asked the Government to make public its plans for the devolution of the North-East and to provide proper care and security for all displaced persons. European NGOs also met Commonwealth Deputy Secretary General Anthony Siaguru in London to explore other mediation possibilities.

An attempt to bring the two parties

back to the table in late August broke down when the LTTE refused to consider preconditions to the resumption of talks, knowing one of them would inevitably centre on disarmament.

The impasse to peace remains in such unrealistic preconditions which neither side seem yet willing to relinquish. The LTTE, having again proved itself a powerful military adversary is unlikely to strip away its strength before reaching some basis for agreement.

The Government's continuing nightmare is that the LTTE will not disarm after they reach agreement either.

Mosque massacres spark communal inferno

The Killing Fields of the east

SRI LANKA's east coast became a communal killing ground when two mosques in Kattankudy south of Batticaloa, full of Muslims at Friday prayers were attacked by gunmen on 3 August. More than 140 people were killed and another 87 injured. A week later, in a similar attack on four hamlets of Eravur, 119 Muslims were killed and 60 injured.

The Government and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) accused the Tigers of both atrocities. In a statement released in London, the LTTE denied involvement saying the killings were carried out by security forces in an attempt to gain sympathy from Muslim countries while Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne was on an arms-buying tour of Gulf states.

Other sources say the killings were a calculated act of revenge by the Tigers. When the LTTE took over the east, they extorted large sums of money from rich Muslim merchants while wooing the poorer elements. Muslim labour was used to build a chain of Tiger bunkers and paid generously. When the Army came in, Muslim youth openly fraternised with soldiers leading them to bunker hideouts and pointing out LTTE sympathisers.

The Kattankudy killings were designed to enforce Muslim non-cooperation with the Army but have backfired observers say, as Home Guard units mushroom in every Muslim village and the SLMC's armed wing *Jihad* is swamped by a flood of recruits.

The massacres touched off a spiral of

reprisal killings throughout the east. After the Eravur killings, 85 Tamils were hacked to death at Chenkalady a few miles north. Among the dead was Arasakone, brother of former UNP Home Affairs Minister KW Devanayagam. An American Jesuit priest Fr Eugene Hebert, who had worked in the Batticaloa area for 40 years, disappeared between Chenkalady and Eravur a few days later and is feared dead.

Vantharumoolai refugee camp at Eastern University now houses 35,000 Tamil refugees in the wake of Eravur. Government sources say almost 150,000 people are displaced in Batticaloa District, many without food or shelter. International NGOs in Colombo say they will supervise a new relief programme which will cost \$2 million.

Amparai District, predominantly Muslim, suffered the same cycle of senseless killing. The Army reportedly shot dead 22 Tamil patients at Pottuvil hospital in early August and 32 Sinhalese were hacked to death at Bandaraduwa, allegedly by the LTTE. Other reports say 90 Tamils were massacred at Oluvil in Amparai in early August.

As the litany of killings continued, Tamil and Muslim refugees streamed out of the east, running the gauntlet of Army patrols, LTTE units and Muslim home guards. For those left in the refugee camps, relief workers say diarrhoea is endemic and food stocks critical.

Observers say there is no way back for the east, now brutally polarised beyond repair. SLMC delegates in Colombo tabled plans in late August for a separate Muslim Province based around Amparai District and the only prospect now is of a three-way war.

Terror zone in Trincomalee

IN TRINCOMALEE, one of the more secure foot-holds of the Army in the North-East, it is increasingly obvious that the Army is using the same terror tactics that smashed the JVP in the south last year.

Tamil MP Mavai Senathirajah told Parliament on 10 August that the Army killed 215 Tamil civilians at Selvanayakapuram, China Bay and Tambalakamam during the June takeover. Armed men in black uniforms continue to arrive at the refugee camps in the town late at night in unmarked vehicles, abducting male Tamils.

Government Agent (GA) Wijekoon in charge of civil administration is bent on stoking the fires of ethnic unrest, observers say. Sinhalese fishermen from Matara, resettled in Trincomalee District in the '70s have been returned to coastal villages around Sirimapura from Fort Frederick refugee camp and an order for all government servants to report for work by 3 August on pain of dismissal is designed to clear the administration of Tamils, local sources say.

Catholic priests who went to Fort Frederick in mid-August to ask for increased assistance for refugees from GA Wijekoon were beaten up by three Sinhalese as they left. Water and sanitation is still a critical factor in most camps and international agencies say they will step up their relief effort.

Outside the town, LTTE forces re-

main entrenched especially to the north at Thiriyai and Kuchchaveli. Defence sources say 15 Sinhalese fishermen were killed in an LTTE attack in a lorry bound for Pulmoddai on 13 August. Two days later ten soldiers died in an LTTE ambush at Pulmoddai. Five LTTE cadres were killed in a clash at Palampataru near Muthur a day later. At Verugal on 20 August in another attack five LTTE cadres died and five soldiers were seriously wounded.

Tamil sources say government colonisation is gathering pace in Madathady and Abeyapuram with Tamils ejected from their homes in favour of Sinhalese refugees. The Army clearly means to hold Trincomalee as a buffer zone whatever the outcome in the north or east.

The battle for Mullaitivu

AFTER a fierce four-day battle with Tiger guerrillas, unconfirmed reports say Sri Lanka forces gained control of the isolated but strategic town of Mullaitivu south-east of Jaffna in late August.

Mullaitivu Army base, one of ten camps surrounded by Tiger units in the North came under heavy fire from the LTTE on 27 August. Five soldiers were killed and more than forty seriously injured. Army reinforcements were airlifted to Vellamullivaikal setting off a struggle for the control of the town centre.

Two days of aerial bombing and helicopter strafing ensued and defence sources claim they now have full control of Mullaitivu and its outskirts. Tiger and civilian casualties are not known. The Army says the LTTE attack was a diversion designed to divert Sri Lankan forces from the assault on Mandaitivu island and the causeway to Jaffna. The Mullaitivu area provides a strategic link between the north and east for the LTTE and Tiger leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran's base camp is said to be situated there.

MANNAR ISLAND IS THE BRIDGE TO SAFETY FOR SRI LANKAN REFUGEES

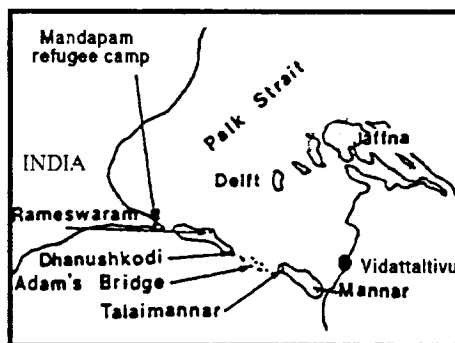
100,000 flee the North-East

OVER 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees have arrived in south India, refugee authorities say, in the ten weeks since the war began in the North-East. A further one million are displaced, huddled in churches or schools or with relatives - over 350,000 in the Jaffna area alone as bombing runs send fresh waves of panic through the civilian population.

Adam's Bridge - a slender band of reefs, shallows and sandbanks that links Tamil Nadu to Mannar Island and Sri Lanka - is the lifeline for thousands seeking safety in south India. From as far afield as Trincomalee, growing numbers make the perilous journey to Vidattaltivu on the mainland, where 2,000 a day brave a two hour sea journey past Sri Lankan naval patrols to Erukalampiddy on Mannar Island.

The refugees work their way west to Talaimannar where local fishermen slip past Indian naval patrols through the shallows of Adam's Bridge with 30 or more people crammed into their tiny craft at Rs1,000 (\$25) a head. Indian patrols make no real attempt to stop the escapees, screening only the occasional boat for LTTE suspects.

Once in India, the refugees are



despatched to improvised refugee camps across Tamil Nadu. The State government currently pays a cash dole of Rs150 a month and provides subsidised rice at 5% of the market price. Local farmers and businessmen are also encouraged to employ refugee labour at cheap rates, all of which creates resentment among a local population oppressed by chronic poverty, drought and indebtedness.

No-one knows how long India will continue its open-handed policy towards the Sri Lankan Tamils and whether it has an ulterior motive in mind but the exodus is already a political and financial crisis for the Tamil Nadu state government.

Those who flee the North-East tell of Army terror tactics reminiscent of the campaign against the southern insurgent

JVP last year. After the Tigers stemmed the Army advance west by destroying Cheddikulam bridge on 10 August, the village was razed to the ground and 25 people beheaded, their heads grotesquely displayed on poles.

International refugee agency, UNHCR, wants to turn Mannar Island into a demilitarised zone to create a temporary haven for the displaced and stem the flow to south India. The LTTE who retain control of Mannar have so far refused but the Sri Lankan government has its own plans to build a refugee complex at Vavuniya, surrounded by barbed wire and tight military security.

Critics say it will become a concentration camp for Jaffna civilians pushed out when the Army finally makes its full-scale assault on the peninsula. After several atrocities like the Cheddikulam killings in Vavuniya this month, local people are unlikely to go anywhere near it.

In fishing villages on the north-east coast between Mullaitivu and Point Pedro there are another 60,000 displaced, many waiting to make the more perilous sea journey around the peninsula past Sri Lankan gunboats to an uncertain future in south India.

Disappeared families petition the President

A NEW ORGANISATION, the Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared (PFMD) has sprung up in southern Sri Lanka to fight for the rights of thousands missing since the Army brutally crushed the insurgent People's Liberation Front (JVP) last year.

Like the Mothers for Human Rights movement launched in July, PFMD has strong support from opposition politicians including NSSP leader Vasudeva Nanayakkara and has organised meetings in Colombo and the south where hundreds of women have come forward to register disappeared relatives.

After a meeting in Embilipitiya in mid-August, a PFMD delegation of disappeared families met President Premadasa on a visit to the town a few days later and presented him with a petition asking for information on missing husbands, sons and brothers. Mr Premadasa in a written acknowledgement has agreed to look into the cases.

The Army admits to holding 10,000 young JVP suspects in custody but may hold many others unofficially. For many PFMD families their first priority is to find

out whether their loved one is still alive. The diplomatic community in Colombo estimates over 30,000 people died in the south last year in the wake of Army and JVP actions.

The missing persons unit at the Army Joint Operations Command in Colombo says 1,177 cases have been cleared up, arising from 5,000 letters received in the last two months. JVP suspects' families say however that they are refused death certificates to disqualify them from a Government compensation for victims of violence.

But "We are still alive" say JVP posters appearing in small villages throughout the South this month. So too are the dreaded death squads identified with the military. In early August, more than 20 charred bodies were found at Rajawela, Akuressa and Pujapitiya in Kandy District. Others appeared at Valmuralle in Matara and Avissawela a few weeks later. "Asia's dirtiest war" is not over yet.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas. If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact

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