

# The Sri Lanka Monitor

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## Licensing atrocity

**H**OURS after the Sri Lankan government imposed military censorship on press reporting of its bitter and unpredictable war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on 21 September, aircraft bombed a Jaffna schoolyard crammed with 750 children on their lunchbreak, killing 34 and seriously injuring over 150 others.

Two surgeons from French medical agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) worked through the night at Point Pedro's Manthikai hospital carrying out 22 amputations, four cases of both legs. Ten of the amputees were under 12. The LTTE says 71 Tamil civilians were killed in bombing raids in the Nagarkoil and Vadamaratchy areas in a 24-hour period.

Military sources first denied the attack then claimed Nagarkoil school was a *Sea Tiger* base where LTTE cadre had gathered to honour Tiger martyr *Thileepan* as part of the LTTE's Annual Heroes Week celebrations.

Some of the dead must have been LTTE because the Tigers recruit children insisted an embarrassed Defence Ministry spokesman as he warned civilians in Jaffna to keep away from Tiger positions. Amnesty International immediately issued an urgent appeal to the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to protect civilians and avoid deliberate and arbitrary killings.

Six weeks earlier, Sri Lankan aircraft bombed civilians seeking refuge around Navaly Catholic church four miles west of Jaffna town killing 130 people and injuring another 120. Defence sources claimed a LTTE ammunition dump close to the church exploded.

Reports of the Nagarkoil bombing were heavily censored under the new restrictions. Newspapers were printing exaggerated and distorted accounts of the war threatening state security said Information minister Dharmasiri Senanayake, justifying the new clampdown at a cabinet press briefing.

Within 72 hours, the government had backtracked after protests from the Foreign Correspondents Association,

### *34 children blown to pieces in a Jaffna schoolyard after press censor- ship imposed*

human rights groups and the diplomatic community. Censorship would be lifted on foreign correspondents but not on the national press. Colombo editorials denounced the climbdown as inept and "compounding stupidity". The Nagarkoil bombing was part of *Operation Handshake* a new Sri Lankan offensive which began on 12 September to relieve Palaly airbase, the military's fragile foothold on the Jaffna peninsula as LTTE long-range mortars pounded the airstrip. Over 3,000 troops pushed into Valikamam North accompanied by heavy shelling which displaced over 5,000 people and killed 30 civilians and injured over 50. Over 20 LTTE died in an abortive attempt to retake Punnalaikadduvan south of Chankanai. Three *Sea Tiger* suicide commandos died in an unsuccessful diversionary attack on the military harbour at Kankesanthurai. In late September a new advance by Sri Lankan troops captured 21 sq kms of territory including Atchuveli and four other small towns south of Palaly. Heavy fighting continues.

As the monsoon approaches, the military has opted for a step-by-step advance rather than an all-out offensive on Jaffna, less risky strategically and in terms of international opinion. It also means fighting will continue if the weather holds but logistical problems will multiply to provision 30,000 troops in four bases around Jaffna as Tiger attacks on air and sea routes intensify.

There was speculation that the Nagarkoil bombing was a revenge attack

after a Russian-built Sri Lankan Airforce Antonov crashed into the sea 20 miles north of Colombo on 13 September, killing 70 soldiers bound for Palaly. Mechanical failure was more likely than Tiger sabotage said Air Commodore Jayalath Weerakody but the press widely reported that the dead pilot was a Tamil.

Like Navaly whether Nagarkoil was accidental or deliberate, air and artillery attacks on northern civilians will continue. The military has too few pilots to fire rogue killers or too little money to provide electronic bombing sights. Civilians are unidentifiable from the air - unless perhaps there are 750 of them all dressed in spotless white school uniforms. The military are the long-term losers say Tamils. Such callous attacks provide a massive recruiting boost for the Tigers.

The censorship debacle highlights the government's growing instability and its accelerating collision course with the media. Police raided newspaper offices after the press reported that disaffected MPs from the ruling coalition's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) demanded the cabinet's resignation at a stormy parliamentary group meeting in early September.

Hard-line deputy Defence minister Col. Anuruddha Ratwatte is rattled by media speculation of growing factionalism in the military and a whispering campaign that the Army's northern commander Lt.Gen. Rohan Daluwatte is implicated in a million dollar smuggling racket providing weapons to the Tigers. Rumours spread by cowards a defiant Col. Ratwatte told Parliament. What probably triggered the clampdown on the media, say analysts was the reporting of the Navy's new sonar capacity to combat the LTTE's underwater suicide squads - giving vital information to the enemy in the eyes of Col. Ratwatte and the defence establishment.

But this clumsy gagging of the press has already served a purpose. Colombo's moral guardians, in and out of print, spent most of the following weekends fulminating over freedom of expression rather than the killing and maiming of scores of innocent schoolchildren.

## THE NORTH

## Lifeline to Jaffna

ALMOST 5,000 tonnes of food aid and 7,000 barrels of kerosene were sent to Jaffna in early September say Colombo officials after a seven-week suspension that left food stocks in the peninsula perilously low.

The ICRC has resumed escorting relief ships but ministry sources claim the LTTE forced one consignment bound for Army-controlled Kankesanthurai ashore at the Tigers' Point Pedro harbour. Officials play down the six-week blockade saying Rs 785 million (\$15.7 million) of food has been sent to Jaffna in the first six months of 1995.

But aid agencies are increasingly anxious over the welfare of the peninsula's 850,000 population. Over 80% are officially dependent on food stamps or dry rations for the displaced. There are only three surgeons in Jaffna and medical supplies are marginal. The government turned down an ICRC request in July to place a four-person surgical team at Jaffna General hospital.

NGOs say there are no government emergency-prepared plans or pre-positioned food or medical buffer stocks in the event of a second major military offensive before the October monsoon. A United Nations Emergency Response team was refused permission to visit Jaffna by the government who approved a joint series of seminars in Colombo instead.

Inside the peninsula, Tiger propaganda has reached fever pitch in schools and tutorials against a backdrop of artillery

shelling and air attacks. The Tigers have launched a new defence levy to raise millions of rupees and a further push on recruitment. Tiger radio said over 100,000 Jaffna people staged a major demonstration in late September to protest against the indiscriminate bombing of civilians and the callous killing of 34 children in a bombing raid on Nagarkoil school.

The battle for the seas around Jaffna has intensified as the Tigers try to sever the military's supply lines and strike at Navy positions on the islands west of Jaffna. Defence sources say Navy units routed a six-boat Tiger flotilla in late September, crammed with LTTE cadre bound for Karainagar base. One Tiger boat was destroyed.

A relief ship *MV Lanka Muditha* and a Dvora patrol boat were damaged in another fierce sea battle outside Kankesanthurai on 20 September. Defence sources claim 11 *Sea Tigers* were killed. Two leading *Sea Tigers* were reportedly killed in an engagement with a Navy convoy south of Mullaitivu in early September.

On the mainland south of Jaffna, the hit-and-run war continues. Some 11 of Sri Lanka's crack *Special Forces* unit were killed and seven injured in a landmine explosion close to Kokkuthoduvai in the flashpoint Weli Oya region in early September. One soldier and six LTTE cadre were killed in a confrontation at Vadukkai in Mullaitivu District in late September.

### Women uprooted

Women refugees bear the greatest burden when families are uprooted by war or famine, Sri Lankan Women's Affairs minister Srimani Athulathmudali told the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing in early September. Over 500,000 people are internally displaced by the fighting in Sri Lanka and another 500,000 have sought refuge in other countries.

### Campus crisis

Students are occupying a building after prestigious Peradeniya University was closed indefinitely because of incessant "ragging" (bullying) of new students and intimidation of lecturers.

### Peace poker

The US Congress passed a resolution in mid-September condemning the LTTE as a major terrorist organisation and offering its good offices to resolve the ethnic conflict. Sri Lankan officials issued a denial after US State Secretary for Asia Robin Raphael told journalists during a visit to Colombo that the People's Alliance government would welcome new peace talks.

### JVP rebuilding

A senior police officer told *Reuters* that a spate of robberies of temples and antiques in the south is to buy weapons for the resurgent Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) who led a three-year insurgency between 1987 and 1990 in which 40,000 people died. Over 35 JVP suspects are in custody.

# Hill country strikes

PRESIDENT Chandrika Kumaratunge has assured the 16-member Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC) that the rights of plantation workers will not be compromised in the government's privatisation plans. The management of 449 estates was handed to 23 private companies for a five-year term in 1992 following World Bank recommendations. The companies will own 51% of the shares and will manage the plantations for 50 years.

JPTUC accuses companies of breaching earlier collective agreements, increasing workloads and reducing the number of work days. Over 15,000 workers on eight estates managed by Maskeliya Plantation Company began a strike on 18

September demanding 26 days work in a month. Reports say over 2,000 people, including 500 students have left the area for Colombo and other urban centres in search of jobs. President Kumaratunge has ordered the Plantation Ministry to seek a new collective agreement between the unions and the management companies.

Trade unions are worried over reports that 45 estates in Hatton, Matale and Kandy under state corporations JEDB and SLSPC will be closed affecting over 50,000 workers and 225,000 dependants. Illegal occupation of estate lands is also a major concern.

Badulla MP TV Sennan says over 15,000 workers are on strike since 25

September protesting the invasion of lands on Shawlands and Adawatte estates by outsiders.

Reports say violence and arrests in the Hill Country are on the increase. Tamil youths from Hope Estate were assaulted and four Tamil shops in Hewahette town burned by mobs on 3 September. The following day a number of estates in Bulathsinhala were attacked by gangs and workers' houses damaged. Three workers were injured.

Matale MP S Rajaratnam says Plantation Tamils are being attacked or arrested for merely talking in Tamil in public. A number of habeas corpus applications relating to plantation youths are before the Court of Appeal.

## ■ A spate of LTTE attacks in the east

# Tigers tighten the noose

THE Tigers are tightening the noose on the east, stepping up attacks to forestall a Jaffna offensive. Some 19 Sri Lankan soldiers and two civilians were killed in early September in a LTTE ambush on the strategic Welikande road linking Batticaloa to the rest of the island.

North of the road in Vaharai where the LTTE holds sway, the Tigers are biting into the Mahaweli B Zone settlements, displacing over 20,000 villagers. Another seven soldiers died in a dawn ambush on the Welikande road a week later.

Batticaloa town was blacked out after the Tigers blew two electricity transformers at Pulianthivu in mid-September. Slowly the pressure is mounting. Analysts believe that military has made a

major tactical error in withdrawing thousands of troops to bolster a Jaffna offensive conceding most of the hinterland to the LTTE. Four police commando Special Task Force (STF) camps were withdrawn from west of the lagoon on 19 September. One of them, Ambilanthurai, was virtually demolished in an abortive Tiger attack in late August. Over 30 LTTE and six police were killed. Before the withdrawal three civilians died when they stumbled upon a STF ambush near Kakkaddicholai. Their bodies are at Batticaloa hospital.

Government control of the coastal strip is increasingly fragile. Over 20 policemen were killed when Tiger cadre stormed Kalkudah police station 20 miles north of Batticaloa town in late

September burning it to the ground. Press reports of the incident were heavily censored by the new regulations. After a policeman was killed at a checkpoint on the Chenkalady road, the brother of local LTTE leader *Babu* was shot dead reportedly "spying" on a nearby Army camp.

Further south in remote Amparai District, 19 soldiers and three LTTE were killed when a road-clearing patrol was ambushed near Bakiella on 15 September. Surrounding jungles were heavily shelled afterwards. Ten Sinhalese farmers were abducted by LTTE nearby in a separate incident.

Eight soldiers and eight Tiger cadre were killed when 300 LTTE attacked an Army camp on the Maha Oya road linking the region with Kandy and the west. Two Tiger cadre were killed in a shootout with STF forces near Kalmunai on 20 September. Two police commandos were injured.

To the north in Trincomalee the Tigers are creeping ever closer to the town perimeter. The LTTE is encroaching on both flanks and hundreds of Muslims have fled from Nilaveli and Upparu. Deputy Defence minister Ratwatta on a fact-finding visit assured thousands of destitute civilians from Eechilampathai that cooperative stores would be reopened in secured areas after the military's withdrawal last month.

From the margins of Trincomalee south to Batticaloa thousands of square miles are in Tiger hands. It is not a buffer zone. It is a launching pad.

## Monks protest

**OVER 3,000 Sinhalese Buddhist monks marched through the streets of Kandy on 24 September to inaugurate an island-wide protest campaign by the influential Buddhist clergy against President Kumaratunge's devolution package offering extensive autonomy to the minority Tamils. The leading Malwatte and Asgiriya Buddhist orders say the proposals are a precursor to dividing Sri Lanka. The Amarapura Sangha Sabha echoes the sentiments of many Sinhalese denouncing the devolution of coastal, foreign investment, land and police powers to regional assemblies under the proposed union of eight regions. President Chandrika says the public and the clergy have misunderstood or misinterpreted the proposals and will mobilise her new lay Buddhist *White Lotus* movement in a mission to explain the thinking behind them. A September opinion poll by Mitofsky International showed 40% of the 2,340 sample were unaware or uninformed of the proposals which go to a Parliamentary Select Committee in November. As Sinhala opposition hardens there is a new clamour of voices casting doubt on two generations of discrimination claimed by the Tamils. There is a whiff of '56 in the air, when the President's father SWRD Bandaranaike was forced to drop plans for Tamil devolution and was later assassinated by a Buddhist monk.**

**There must be dialogue with the Tamils says MP Indika Gunawardena. EPDP, one of three Tamil militia groups backing the Army and brokering for power, has submitted counter proposals citing the virtually autonomous status of Swedish-speaking Aland province in Finland. Another Tamil militant now an MP, PLOTE leader P Sitharthan says the Tigers will not buy the President's devolution package but if it meets the Tamil people's aspirations they will compel the LTTE to accept it. Tell that to the people of Jaffna.**

## Landscape of fear

AS Sri Lankan forces withdraw from west of Batticaloa lagoon, LTTE is increasingly targeting members of Tamil militant groups which are fighting at the side of the government.

TELO member Markandu Asokumar was shot dead by the Tigers on 20 September as he left the Kommathurai Army camp. A Tiger who infiltrated Valaichenai town to kill another TELO cadre was identified, but managed to escape when fired on. TELO member A Manimaran was gunned down at Chenkalady on 27 September.

In the last three months at least 12 people have been killed in Batticaloa, including TELO local council member S Maharasa. A note tied to Mr Maharasa's body said "punishment for traitors".

Tamil-Muslim tensions rose in Batticaloa after the LTTE hijacked five boats with Muslim fishermen off Kalkudah on 19 September. Police say two Muslims were released later. Deputy Posts minister MLAM Hisbullah appealed for calm when Tamil youths S Sivakumar and I Thevaraj went missing on 23 September after visiting Oddamavady, a Muslim village.

At least 15 civilians have been abducted in death squad white vans in Army-controlled areas of Trincomalee. Jaffna MP S Thangavel pleaded in Parliament on 6 September to put an end to "white van atrocities". Lakshmi Pillai was raped on 28 August by two men in a white van. They have been arrested, but people are convinced there will be no prosecution.

# Human rights group slams India's record on Sri Lankan refugees *live in squalor or go home!*

*LIVE in squalor or go home!* is the Indian government's message to Sri Lankan refugees in the southern state of Tamil Nadu says a hard-hitting report by the New Delhi-based South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre (SAHRDC).

India has allowed conditions to deteriorate in 130 camps for 60,000 Sri Lankan refugees to pressure them into returning home. Many of the 40,000 Sri Lankans who have gone back on a bilateral government repatriation programme since 1992 were coerced to return home "overtly or covertly" says SAHRDC.

The human rights group also questions the role of United Nations refugee agency UNHCR who monitors the voluntariness of the repatriations. UNHCR is banned from the camps and allowed only cursory interview facilities at the point of departure. Refugee rations and dole remain frozen at 1990 levels in which time the cost of living has soared by 200%.

Camp conditions are squalid and insanitary and refugees are harassed and

intimidated by local police officials. Over 1,500 refugees who have complained to officials or have refused to repatriate are labelled as LTTE suspects or troublemakers and held in incommunicado detention in prison-like "special camps" without charge or trial. Voluntary agencies are also banned from working in all refugee camps since 1993 and SAHRDC calls for new NGO primary health care and education programmes to raise living standards.

The LTTE threat to Tamil Nadu is an ever-present factor in Tamil politics and the refugees remain the scapegoat. India's Union government in New Delhi and the Madras state administration regularly accuse each other of secret deals with the Tigers to foster their infiltration. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha says the security threat to the south will not be lifted until the refugees are expelled *en masse*.

The issue has caught fire again after a successful jail break in Vellore last month by 43 LTTE suspects. Both New Delhi and Madras accuse each other of

complicity. India's Commerce minister P Chidambaram in Madras in early September told journalists that LTTE militants had a free run of the Tamil Nadu coastline and bomb culture was pervasive in the state. Three days later when two small bombs exploded outside the Sri Lankan High Commission in Madras, refugee camps were sealed off threatening the casual labouring jobs that supplements the exiles' meagre rations. A south Indian Tamil was later arrested for the blast.

Madras Chief Minister Jayalalitha's administration is groaning under a mountain of accusations of graft and corruption. A new storm of protest erupted after she bankrolled a billion rupee (\$300 million) wedding reception in early September for her adopted son feeding over 200,000 people. Opposition politicians have called for an income tax probe on the extravaganza. Analysts predict Jayalalitha will be ousted at state elections next March especially if another film star politician-in-waiting Rajanikanth enters the fray.

## *Colombo's killer squads vie for victims*

COLOMBO'S 350,000 Tamils are still stunned by the arrest of covert death squads in the police commando Special Task Force (STF) accused of abducting and strangling 25 Tamils in a disused toilet in STF headquarters.

Another 60 STF personnel are being questioned. Amnesty International has applauded the arrests but the problem is not over yet. Human rights workers say another four bodies have appeared since the arrests, kept out of the papers by current press censorship. They claim a special police unit in the Crime Detection Bureau backed by senior politicians is responsible.

New directives to ensure security forces inform police of arrests will have little effect. CT Janz, chairman of the government's Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) told journalists that HRTF enquiries confirmed over 600 detainees were held illegally in jails and police stations across the capital.

As the Tiger threat to the capital intensifies, Colombo Tamils are increasingly subject to search and detention as checkpoints in the city multiply and night raids on Tamil suburbs uncover fresh

plots and suspects. Police believe hundreds of *Black Tiger* suicide bombers have penetrated the capital, secreted among the 150,000 Tamil refugees who have fled the North-East war.

Colombo police chief Kotakadeniya

revealed a new plot in early September to assassinate President Chandrika Kumaratunge and Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao after LTTE operative *Rasan* and eight others were arrested. The Tigers were planning seven suicide bombers to simultaneously attack the seven vehicles in Mrs Kumaratunge's motorcade in what would have been a spectacular *coup de theatre*. The LTTE hit-team set out to befriend a key figure in the President's inner circle, the same modus operandi as President Premadasa's assassination in 1993.

Police also arrested a Tamil youth caught with a blueprint of Colombo's new skyscraper twin-tower \$120 million World Trade Centre - another Tiger high-profile target.

There is a new drive to smash the LTTE's bankers and money-laundering conduit in Colombo. Police say millions of rupees are syphoned north every month by Tiger tax collectors who put the squeeze on Tamil factories and businesses in the capital. Seven wealthy Tamil businessmen were arrested in early September accused of involvement and Rs 1.6 million (\$32,000) recovered.

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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