Violence, Extreme Poverty and Inequality: the Voices of Civilians Trapped in Conflict in Northern Sri Lanka

Throughout 2008, in parts of northern Sri Lanka controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the conflict between the government forces and LTTE intensified. Civilians in the region known as the Vanni have been effectively trapped in the conflict, with tens of thousands forcibly displaced, often repeatedly, as the Sri Lankan military advanced further towards the centre of LTTE-controlled territory. Access to the region is severely restricted and, as the situation has deteriorated, very little reliable information has been available. In September 2008, the Sri Lankan government ordered United Nations and non-governmental aid workers to leave northern Vanni.

One former aid worker who was forced to leave the Vanni worked with The Equal Rights Trust to record the voices of civilians trapped between the parties to the conflict.

Following the collapse of a ceasefire agreement in January 2008, the Sri Lankan military launched a major offensive to reclaim areas of the north and east of the country previously controlled by the LTTE. Tens of thousands of people have been forcibly displaced, trying to escape the aerial bombardment and shelling by the Sri Lankan forces. Many families have been displaced repeatedly as the Sri Lankan armed forces pushed further towards the town of Kilinochchi, the LTTE stronghold. Civilians trapped in the conflict are denied their basic right to equality. They are subject to violence and repeated forced displacement; their livelihoods are severely restricted, many are subject to extreme poverty.

Pillai, 59, School Principal:
“I am a school principal in Poonakary. In the last few months 24 of the 27 schools in my district have been displaced. That’s over 7,000 students and 225 teachers. We have all moved closer to Kilinochchi town but many have yet to find a safe place and they move every seven days or so. Many of us are living under trees and looking for shelter. How do I look after my students in this situation? I have no school for them to attend and I have no idea where many of them are. We need time to regroup and find temporary school buildings to begin teaching again. All the families are farmers and fishermen, they have all lost their livelihoods. This is such a hard time for all the people in the Vanni. All are constantly moving and are afraid, we don’t have work and the children cannot study well. How can I teach children who are so frightened? They have no concentration for education, whenever they hear a Kfir (fighter jet) or shelling they all run to the bunker, many
start crying or shaking with fear and we have to spend so much time consoling them... but we are also scared. Last year my eldest daughter was taken by the LTTE to fight. She was 19 years old. For a year I had to console my wife. She cried and cried every night. In June this year she was given back to us, but she was dead. I have no words for my wife, what can I say to her. If we get any chance I want to leave here with my family. We cannot go on like this, it is breaking our hearts.”

Selva, 32, Bicycle Repair Man:

“My family and I were displaced from Pallai in 1995 due to heavy shelling. We have been living in Jeyapuram for the past 13 years and I have built a reputation for repairing bikes. In Jeyapuram I can earn between Rs. 300 - 500 per day. On August 3rd this year we had to leave Jeyapuram due to the shelling again. My family and I were very upset and ran away, throughout the night. I understood that something may happen in my area so I had arranged my tools in a way that I could collect them quickly. Now we are here in Selvanagar and I am still trying to make a living. It is very hard as the people around me have no money and we are all in the same position. In the past three days I have only made Rs. 20. This is not enough to buy anything. Everything in the Vanni is now so expensive and we are living hand to mouth. I continue to work and fix bicycles because I don’t want to just sit and think about my life and how I will support my family. When I am working I am happy and I don’t think. But I need to earn money to look after my wife and children. I’m very afraid of the army coming to this area. I am not sure if I would leave if given the chance. If all the people from my village leave and go to the government area then I will take my family. But we are all afraid, we have never been out there and we don’t know what to expect.”

As the conflict further intensified in the second half of 2008, civilians have been effectively trapped between the two warring parties: afraid to remain in LTTE-controlled territory and afraid or unable to flee to government-controlled territory. Civilians who stay behind are at risk of aerial bombardment on one hand, and forced recruitment into the ranks of the LTTE, on the other. Thousands of families trying to flee to government-controlled areas have been reportedly hindered by the operation of a strict pass system by the LTTE. Those that have managed to flee to government-controlled territory are often reportedly ‘warehoused’ in camps that can operate as de facto detention centres.

Similar human rights abuses suffered by the civilians in northern Sri Lanka have been ex-
Mary, 42, Mother of Two:

"With the situation here it is very difficult to be a mother. I have two children, a 16 year old son and a 13 year old daughter. There are many problems I face but my biggest fear is the recruitment of my children by the LTTE. My son often comes home from school and tells me that another student, from the grade above his, has been taken to fight. This is very hard for the children and they all discuss their birthdays and work out who will be taken first, when the time comes. Another major problem we have is the jealousy of our community. When a child is taken from a home the parents will begin to tell the LTTE of other children that are hiding in neighbours’ homes. There is a sense of jealousy amongst our community that makes us tell on each other. I know a girl who hid in a pit for six months. Her father brought her food and water every night and she stayed there out of sight. One hot day a neighbour spotted her taking water from the well and returning to the pit. The next day the LTTE came and took her from the pit. My children are also so scared of the Kfirs. My son walked home from school one evening and a Kfir swooped out of the sky and bombed an LTTE base close to our house. The sound was terribly loud and put so much fear inside me. I realised that my son would be walking in that area at the time and I screamed, in fear that he may have been hit. We met on the path running towards each other. I was so scared and happy to see him. But now he is so scared about the Kfirs. He hears them before any of us at home. I want my children to receive the best education and study hard but when we hear the Kfirs in the morning I don’t want them to leave for school. I get so worried that they will be killed that day, so I tell them to stay at home. They sometimes miss a day or two every week because of my fear and that makes me very sad, like I’m being a bad mother, but I’m just trying to protect my children."
Non-discrimination is a basic principle of international humanitarian law and human rights law. All parties to the conflict in Sri Lanka are bound by customary international humanitarian law rules concerning non-international armed conflict. Both the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE are obliged to treat those not taking active part in the hostilities humanely at all times, and without discrimination.

Sandra, 25, Displaced Person, Uruthirapuram, Kilinochchi:

“I have been displaced from my homes seven times over the past three years. In 2005 we had a good life in Parapan Kandal, (LTTE controlled) Mannar District until the Sri Lankan Army began to shell the area near our homes. My husband was a fisherman and we lived well. At the time of the shelling I was pregnant and had to run through the night to safety, since then I have been moving every six months due to the shelling. I am now sat here under this tree and it’s the seventh time. I am tired of running. This situation is so hard for us now, my baby is one and a half years old and my husband has no work. We are living hand to mouth and having to take charity from NGOs and family. I feel very sad about this situation. I have been happy living under the LTTE for many years, but the fighting needs to stop, we are all suffering here. I cannot go out to the government areas as I fear that they will kill me or take me to prison, so I am stuck here with my family. This morning we heard that the army are shelling closer; this is very scary as we now have nowhere to go. My family has no food, no money and no transport, where can I run to now?”

Kanhai, 72, Widow:

“I had to leave my home in Jeyapuram two months ago due to the shelling. It was very frightening that night, the shells came and we all panicked. I am a grandmother of five and a great-grandmother of eight. I was so worried for the little ones that night as they are small and did not understand what was happening in our village. We managed to make our way here to Selvanagar and have been here ever since. It’s very difficult for me as I am old and find it hard to live out in the open like this, under trees. We will get help soon from some of the agencies here and I will share a shelter with my grandson and his family. I feel very sad about this situation as he has his own fami-
ily and I feel like I am a burden on them. I try and help as much as I can, with the cooking and playing with his children, but still I feel bad. Our fear is growing day by day as it feels like the shelling has followed us here. Every day it gets closer and we are all worried and confused as to what to do if we have to move again. It feels like the army are all around us now. I grew up in Kandy with my family, but we moved to the Vanni nearly 30 years ago because of the problems then. I really like the Vanni, but since I have been here there have been constant battles and our lives have been one struggle after the other. I’m very sad for my grandchildren who have not known peace in their lives. When I was a child I had the chance to be free and enjoy my childhood. I went swimming, climbed trees and had great adventures. All my grandchildren and great-grandchildren know the sound of bombs and

Kfirs, and now this displacement. Under a tree is no place for a child to grow up. I don’t want to leave this area as it’s all I know nowadays and I am scared that the army will target us if we leave. All we know is the Vanni, the outside is a mystery to us. Most of all, I just want peace in my community and in my mind, and to be able to watch my grandchildren grow into healthy adults.”

UN agencies estimate that by November 2008, the number of internally displaced persons had risen to some 230,000 persons in the Kilinochchi and Mullativu districts as a result of intensified government military operations to regain the last stronghold of the LTTE. Access by humanitarian aid agencies is severely restricted. Many of the displaced are living in the open in make-shift camps. At
a time of seasonal rains, the UN has identified an urgent need for shelter and sanitary supplies in addition to improved access for food convoys. The testimony of Stella, a thirteen-year-old girl whose family was displaced by aerial bombardment three times between January 2007 and October 2008, reveals how the coping mechanisms of civilians, repeatedly displaced and caught in the conflict, have been severely restricted.

Stella, 13:

My home is in Illuppakadavai. On the 2nd of January 2007, at nine in the morning, the Kfirs came. When they bombed my village the ground shook and shrapnel flew everywhere. Many people were injured, and so was I. That’s how I lost my leg. I had to be in Kilinochchi hospital for one month, and return there once a month to visit the doctors. After the bombing, I fled with my family to Kumulamunai. On the 20th of June 2008, there was shelling close to our new home, and we had to run away because we were afraid. We could not take many things and I had to run as fast as I could with my crutches, with help from my family and neighbours. I travelled all the way from Kumulamunai to Jeyapuram like this; it was very difficult. From Jeyapuram to Maniyankulam we were able to get a tractor. We have been in this place for one week, and we have only one shelter; six families live there; that’s around 23 people. There are no proper toilets here, and for me it is very difficult... because of my leg.

I’m on school holidays at the moment, but when school starts again I don’t know how I’ll go; to walk there I’ll always need help from someone. More than that, if we have to move from this place also, I don’t know how I’ll manage; I’ll...
have to run like last time. I have a prosthetic leg, and I can ride a bicycle; if I had a bicycle, life would be much easier for me. I'll be happy if we can get more shelters, to sleep comfortably, and a proper toilet; but more than that, what I want most is a bicycle. We'll stay here if the shelling doesn't come close; otherwise we'll have to move again. If there was peace in this country, we wouldn't have to go through all this; we need peace.

A second interview with Stella took place on 20 August 2008, this time in Manipuram.

The shelling started at 7:30 in the evening and we ran immediately to Konavil School, about 5km away. Our family had to spend the night in the school as I couldn't go on with my crutches. My family were carrying all our belongings and could not help me. I felt sad for my family that I was slowing them down. That night was very loud due to the shelling. Other families had managed to get further away, but we had to stay there because of my injuries. We are now here in the school and again I feel bad. This school is like my old school, but we are using it for a home and the children in the area will suffer. I am very scared that shelling will happen again in this area and we will have to run again. I am tired of always running from place to place and I do not know of any safe place anymore. If the Government and the LTTE allow us, I would be very happy to escape this area. I just want peace to come to me and my family and I don't want to run anymore. I still have very bad dreams about the Kfir attack and when I hear the Kfir these days I get so scared.

1 Fighting between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lanka government started in the 1980s. For an overview of the conflict, see ICRC web pages on Sri Lanka.


3 In January 2008, the government of Sri Lanka withdrew from a 2002 ceasefire, which had begun to collapse in 2005.


5 For example, according to Amnesty International, more than 70,000 people were forcibly displaced by government aerial bombardment and artillery shelling between May and August 2008. See Amnesty International. Tens of thousands at risk in Sri Lanka as fighting escalates, 19 August 2008.

6 See Declaration of Principles on Equality. The Equal Rights Trust, London, 2008. Principle 1 (The Right to Equality) states: "The right to equality is the right of all human beings to be equal in dignity, to be treated with respect and consideration and to participate on an equal basis with others in any area of economic, social, political, cultural or civil life". See also Principle 7 (Discrimination and Violence).

7 According to some reports, the LTTE is actively recruiting minors in camps for the newly displaced. See Amnesty International. Blocking aid workers in Sri Lanka endangers trapped civilians, 10 September 2008.

8 According to Amnesty International, “(s)ome individuals have been forced to stay behind [in LTTE controlled terri-


