
Humanitarian services to the North

Friday, 14 November 2008

Last Updated Tuesday, 18 November 2008

Current situation This status report was prepared by the Peace Secretariat in the context of continuing claims of a humanitarian crisis in the North of Sri Lanka caused by the Government. In fact, it is the LTTE that is trying to precipitate a crisis, which the Government has thus far avoided through close attention to the needs of the people.

Ongoing Government services to people in the NorthThe Government has always been committed to the well being and protection of the people of the country irrespective of ethnic and religious backgrounds or place of residence. Thus, those living even in what are termed 'uncleared' areas, i.e. those controlled by the LTTE, were provided with the same free services as those in the rest of the country. Public health and education are available to all throughout the country, and food and welfare services to some depending on need. These services are provided through a civil administration which has throughout been financed by the Government. This includes capital and recurrent budgets, covering salaries as well as pensions to those in the 'uncleared' areas, who remain in close contact with relevant line Ministries. The heads of the District Administrations, the Government Agents, communicate special needs and travel regularly to Colombo along with their counterparts, as also to special meetings concerned with current needs. The Government has throughout ensured adequate supplies of food and other goods (excluding those limited because of security concerns) to the Vanni, as well as to Jaffna. Concerns about IDPs, and the free food the Government sends them with the assistance of the UN, meant that the regular supplies the Government facilitates for commercial purposes are forgotten. Yet the Commissioner General of Essential Services has throughout ensured that several lorries with food for sale, mainly through the Cooperatives, go into the Vanni each day. During the last few years, prices in the Vanni have remained stable. It should be noted that there has been a mark up because of taxes the LTTE has imposed.

It should be noted that the LTTE has not seriously attempted to disrupt supplies to the Vanni, obviously because it too survives on what the Government sends up. However, it has often tried to disrupt supplies to the Jaffna peninsula, where far more Tamil people live under Government protection than in the whole area under LTTE control in the Vanni. The Vanni was a term used to refer to areas in the Northern Province south of Jaffna, and is now loosely used to refer to those areas under LTTE control. These included the Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi Districts and parts of the Mannar and Vavuniya Districts. Now most of the last three are under Government control, with a population, inclusive of the Northern Muslims expelled by the LTTE in 1990 now in the Puttlam District, greater than that under LTTE control in the Vanni. Disruption of supplies to Jaffna began in August 2006 when the LTTE, in civilian guise, attacked troops at the checkpoint on the A9 road leading northward to the Jaffna peninsula. Though that attack was repulsed, albeit with heavy loss of life, the A9 was then closed at that point, and Government had to ensure supplies by sea. The LTTE had, shortly before that, attacked a vessel carrying SLMM monitors, who had then withdrawn from naval monitoring. This was followed by the LTTE insisting on the withdrawal of monitors from Scandinavian countries in the European Union, which led to massive downscaling of SLMM operations, including the issuing of rulings on violations - to the relief of the LTTE, which had been found guilty of 3,830 violations, whereas the Government had been found guilty of just 350 over a five year period. The Government asked the ICRC to provide safe passage for supply ships but, after one successful run, the ICRC found that guarantees were withdrawn, so it could no longer comply with the Government request. Superhuman efforts by the Commissioner General of Essential Services ensured that supplies were maintained, in spite of LTTE attacks on two supply ships, including a Jordanian one. Prices shot up at that stage, and retaining the confidence of suppliers was not easy, but CGES succeeded, with the assistance of the Navy which had to protect the supply ships, which meant that manpower to deal with the LTTE itself was curtailed. A measure of the success of the Government operation can be seen in the UNHCR report on welfare centres, issued in December 2007, which made it clear that all goods in the basket it used were available, and most of them including essentials were affordable.

The LTTE's attempt to use food as a weapon then did not succeed. Its brazen affirmation of this policy was apparent when, in October 2008, it attacked another couple of ships bearing supplies to Jaffna. Fortunately, though one ship was damaged, most of the supplies were saved and unloaded, so the attempt to impose shortages was defeated.

With regard to the Vanni, the Government has long known that the free supplies it sends up are far more than are needed by the internally displaced in the Vanni. It has asked for accurate figures, but found that even the UN was not in a position to supply these - it took much asking to clearly establish earlier this year that a figure of 40,000 had been counted twice. It is clear that there still is a great inflation of figures, with the population requiring relief according to some NGOs being much greater than the total for the whole Vanni that these NGOs had used in the Common Humanitarian Action Plan last year. However, the Government knows that officials and NGOs are under pressure, the former under physical threat, the latter given their need to maximise funding, and it is better to accept given figures, since otherwise the officials and those actually in need will suffer. To ensure the safety of such people, it is a small price to pay to overfeed LTTE cadres. IDPs

The welfare of civilians is a foremost consideration in Government plans to liberate the North. Sri Lankan forces have the best record in the world currently of troops engaged in the struggle against terrorism. Civilian casualties in the course of combat continue minimal, and Government agencies monitor any alleged incidents carefully. Apart from regular reports from Government Agents, the Peace Secretariat monitors all sources, including LTTE websites, and requests explanations of any allegations.

In over 350 air strikes since current hostilities began, two years ago, there have been allegations of fewer than 50 civilian deaths. This excludes 61 victims of what turned out to be forced LTTE conscription of young girls. The Air Force targeted

what it was informed was a training centre, and the photographs of girls in military fatigues, with weapons, made clear its information was accurate. The initial LTTE claim that this was an orphanage was changed when it was revealed that the orphanage situated there had been moved to Kilinochchi some years previously. The claim that this was a First Aid Training Centre was belied not only by its situation miles away from the homes of the conscripted girls, not only by the pictures of how they had been forced to dress and act, but also by the testimony of a couple who were rescued and were kept safe in Government custody, after a third died mysteriously while in a hospital in the North. Over the four months since the struggle in the North intensified, there have been allegations of just eleven civilian deaths due to airstrikes, of which there were a total of almost 200. With regard to civilian deaths due to Army activity, though allegations are less easy to monitor, there have been fewer than a dozen allegations in the last four months. The most publicised was a claim that the Mullaitivu hospital had been targeted, belied by the Government Agent's report (as well as that of the UNHCR) which reported that shelling was aimed in a radius of one kilometre from the District Hospital, and that one shell landed in the compound of the Hospital. The GA reported that one child of 1½ years died in the incident. Significantly, when the incident was reported to the UN in Geneva, the age had changed.

The Government, however, continues to be aware of the need to keep civilians safe, in particular given the fear that the LTTE might use civilians as human shields, and therefore its advance is extremely slow and careful.

The practice of giving civilians notice of offensives, which worked in the Eastern province, precipitating civilian moves to the safety of Government controlled areas, has not worked in the North to any appreciable extent, because the LTTE is determined to keep people under their control. As Save the Children put it in its 30th September statement, 'the LTTE has not yet permitted more than 300,000 civilians to leave the area'. NGOs leaving the Vanni also reported that the LTTE had refused permission for their workers to leave with them. The Government has therefore continued to provide free food and other supplies to the displaced according to figures given. Whilst initially IDPs were housed in schools, this had to change when the school term began, so shelter too has been provided as best possible, along with water and sanitation facilities. Some of the NGO staff who were not allowed to leave have been working under the GAs and their experience has also helped to alleviate the situation. At the same time, the yeoman service of the GA and his staff, who have been working despite cadre shortages, cannot be underestimated.

It should be noted that there has recently been an increase in displaced persons moving to Government controlled areas, following repeated appeals and attempts to keep corridors free of fire. The LTTE has discouraged such movements, however, as revealed by civilians who have therefore sailed at great risk to themselves from LTTE controlled areas.

On arrival in Government controlled areas, IDPs are required to first register with the Security Forces and with a representative from the respective GA's office and the ICRC. This is essential to establish their identity and to take precautions against infiltration, which the LTTE is known to practice, with destructive consequences, if successful. Once registered, IDPs are taken to IDP welfare centres, in Mannar or in Vavuniya. Their basic food requirements are facilitated by the respective GAs, while education is provided by enrolment in a nearby school as appropriate. Round the clock protection is provided by the Police and Army. People are allowed, if they wish, to seek employment outside the camp as available. However, unless they can establish a close relationship with people in the Northern Province, in which case they can move, they are not permitted to stay out overnight, for obvious security considerations. This does not amount to internment, as has been alleged, and contrary to dramatic claims, there have been no fatalities, from snakebite or other causes, in these IDP Centres.

It is planned of course that, as happened in the East, these long suffering Sri Lankan citizens will be resettled in their homes in the North when it is cleared of LTTE control. It is also planned that durable solutions will then be found for the Northern Muslims, cleared from the North by the LTTE 18 years ago, and forgotten as successive governments sought vainly to negotiate a just settlement with the LTTE.

Communications Division Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process (Courtesy: Sri Lanka Peace Secretariat-SCOPP)