
The civilian flight to freedom, safety

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B. Muralidhar Reddy The distance was only about 1.5 km, but it was a journey fraught with risks Photos: AFP/Sri Lanka Defence Forces COLOMBO: The old and the young, men and women and children, all ran alike, carrying on their heads and shoulders whatever they could, towards the Sri Lanka military checkpoint from the no fire zone (NFZ) where they were being held hostage at gunpoint by a group of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam leaders and cadres led by Velupillai Prabhakaran.

In the approximately 1.5 km they had to cover from their captors to the military checkpoint, they braved bullets and blasts. Despite having been indoctrinated for years to see the Sri Lanka military as nothing but the devil incarnate, they preferred the company of the unknown deep sea, read the security forces, to the known devil, read the LTTE. It has been dubbed as the world's largest hostage rescue operation. The escape of over 58,000 Sri Lankan civilians trapped in the NFZ perhaps has few parallels in recent history. What began as a trickle turned into an avalanche within 24 hours after the Sri Lanka security forces succeeded in breaking the 3 sq km earthen wall built by the Tigers. The wall-cum-ditch had a twin purpose - to halt the military advance as well as to forcibly stop the citizens caught in the crossfire. The doggedness of the military and the desperation of the civilians to reach safety dealt a massive blow to the Tiger mission. Terrorised for weeks and deprived of even the basic necessities of life for months, the civilians were clearly tired of being perpetually on the run since the current phase of war began in August 2006. Among the civilians who crossed over on Monday included those who have been displaced over and over, a dozen times. As the Sri Lanka Army advanced and the Tigers retreated, the civilians followed the latter. Some of them went willingly and others had no other option. With the Army ousting the Tigers from nearly 15,000 sq km of territory that the Tigers lorded over before the start of 'Eelam IV,' ironically the remaining Tiger leaders and cadres themselves became the refugees among the very people they claimed to represent solely. The civilians became for the Tigers a virtual shield against the military onslaught on them. The sudden upsurge of refugees poses an enormous challenge for the government. It is a gigantic task to cater to their short, medium and long term needs and see them through their transition, from temporary camps to resettlement. Steps for succour PTI reports: President Mahinda Rajapaksa on Tuesday ordered officials to gear up for a major relief operation. The Internal Displaced Camps in Vavuniya and other areas braced for the arrival of Tamil civilians. Government Agent and district secretary for Vavuniya, P.S.M. Charles, said the facilities at the temporary welfare centres in Vavuniya had been expanded on the President's instructions. The commander of 58 Division, Brigadier Shavendra Silva, said humanitarian operations were on in full swing. He said troops had rescued over 52,000 hostages over the past 24 hours. Vavuniya camp is home to more than 63,000 refugees. Of them 19,000 were being accommodated at Arunachalam Welfare Village and 8,500 at Kadirgamar Welfare Village. The rest were in 13 transit camps in and around Vavuniya. Authorities were shifting people to the main camp as and when new houses were built. The other displaced Tamil civilians were settled in Mannar, Jaffna and Chalai camps. Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services Rishad Badiuddin said three committees had been appointed to look after them, each with a different function. Courtesy: Hindu.com