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## The truth about IDP camps

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by Kath Noble We are constantly told that restrictions on access to IDP camps prove that awful things are happening. If the situation were under control, this hypothesis goes, the Government would allow people to go and see for themselves. So when journalists write unverified stories about disappearances, rapes, starvation, epidemics and more, often encouraged by equally imaginative NGO reports, they are believed. Few of us trust the Government enough to take its word for the wellbeing of the long suffering people of the Vanni.

I was given permission to travel to Vavuniya last week, and this piece is dedicated to what I saw there. While time in the IDP camps was limited to a couple of days, and I was never very far from the officers who were assigned to escort our party, I believe that it would have been difficult to present a story too different from the truth. There are more than 280,000 people staying in about 20 locations. These range in size from the Vavuniya schools with 1,000 people to the 70,000 people in Zone 2 of Menik Farm on the road to Mannar. My first impression on walking into Saivapirakasa Maha Vidyalaya on Wednesday was that there were rather a lot of visitors. I hadn't even realised that they were allowed. Looking in the book maintained by the lady soldier at the gate, 119 people had been in that day, and more were lined up waiting to enter. She explained that relatives only needed to bring their identity card. Many of the visitors were carrying parcels of food to supplement what was given by the authorities, and it was clear from the smart dress of the majority of the 3,000 residents that clothing and other items had been provided too. The same was true of all the IDP camps I visited, even places a long way from anywhere. At Menik Farm, we passed a CTB bus that had been laid on to transport people from Vavuniya. The next thing to strike me was that it would have been quite feasible to take a photograph of the residents looking through barbed wire, but only with a little effort. There were two rolls of about ten metres in length next to the gate, and my crouching down in front of one of them would have attracted a fair crowd to the other side, even though there was no actual barrier between us. A wrong impression could thus easily have been given. I saw where the infamous pictures of barbed wire were taken later, at Menik Farm Zone 0, and learnt that it was the arrival of a dignitary by helicopter that had attracted people to the very edge of the camp, which turns out to be rather large in area. People don't normally stand anywhere near the barbed wire. An elderly lady approached as our group entered the compound, to complain that she hadn't been given any soap or washing powder. Whether this was the case seemed after some discussion unclear, and she didn't look in the slightest bit dirty. It emerged that she and her husband were both over 65 years of age, and therefore eligible for release, but their nearest relatives lived in Kandy and for some reason couldn't travel to bring them home. Allowing such people to move to a specified location of their choice would seem to be a reasonable alternative. We moved on to one of the new sites being established in the countryside between Menik Farm and Vavuniya, called Dharmapura. Our military escort told us that some 15 to 20 locations were being developed, to house the 20,000 people staying in Vavuniya schools and to reduce the numbers in the more crowded zones at Menik Farm. Each family would have more privacy, he said, and there would be space to initiate activities to give the residents something to do. It was here that I began to appreciate the tremendous contribution of the Army. When the Government started working on the IDP camps in anticipation of the outflow of civilians earlier in the year, the job was given to private contractors, but it either didn't happen or proceeded at an appallingly slow pace. By contrast, the Army is able to clear land and put up shelters in just over a week. When the massive influx of civilians arrived in May, they worked for several days without sleep to get the job done. By the time I came home, I was convinced that complaints from the United Nations about militarisation of the IDP camps had been counterproductive, because the Army seemed to be the most efficient and dedicated of the agencies involved. Our escort had been in the thick of the battle in Putumatalam, but days later was assigned to the IDP camps. Nevertheless, there were no signs of tension with the residents. People interacted quite naturally with the Army, even small children. We saw the benefits of these new sites at Weerapuram on Thursday, where some 6,000 residents had moved in from a number of Vavuniya schools two weeks previously. Although the location was dusty, the advantage of having more space was being demonstrated as our vehicle drew up by a group of boys playing volleyball. If the Government implements its plan to give residents seeds to plant homegardens, the conditions would become quite reasonable. The Army's efficiency was in evidence again. They had built a covered area by the entrance so that visitors wouldn't be exposed to the elements while they waited to enter, but the agencies responsible for putting up identical structures to serve as classrooms hadn't started work, so the tables and chairs provided by the Government lay in a pile by the road. Meanwhile, the officer in charge had decided that lessons had better start, allocating spare tents for the purpose. I understood some of the concerns about unlimited access too. Having wandered off from the group, a small crowd gathered around me and a retired teacher of English and Sinhala from Kilinochchi was brought out to speak. In a deeply conspiratorial tone, she explained that their children had been taken away from them and many lakhs of people had been killed. Not being fresh off the plane from England, I knew that this was untrue, also because I had met quite a number of their children at the centres for LTTE cadres, but people who come looking for horror stories would leap on such quotes with glee. Having lots of outsiders running around probably isn't a very good idea in any case. After the tsunami, hoards of journalists and aid workers descended on the survivors, quickly instilling in them a victim mentality that has proven difficult to shake. Far better that people be allowed to get on with their lives, as much as possible without observation or interference. There is another lesson from the tsunami that could be usefully applied here too. Chandrika Kumaratunga handed over responsibility for the relief and reconstruction work to a group of completely unaccountable business leaders, TAFREN, whose understanding of and commitment to the interests of the affected people was almost zero. Whether as a result or otherwise, clear plans for their recovery took a long time to emerge and even longer to be put into effect. Indeed, we are still reading stories of tsunami projects being completed, four and a half years after the event. While nothing of the sort has been done by Mahinda Rajapaksa, one way of ensuring that the situation in the IDP

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camps improves as far and as quickly as possible, and that the resettlement moves forward as it should, would be to give political leadership to people with a stake in the future of the residents. Tamil politicians who are already canvassing for votes have an incentive to do their best. I saw what the Government can do when it really tries in Menik Farm Zone 0, starting with the piece of cake and ice cold drink that we were given on arrival. Work started there at the end of November, and the results are impressive. Each family has their own semi-permanent house, appropriate for the climate. Homegardens with banana trees, pineapple plants and a whole collection of leaves that I couldn't recognise are set out in front, while sufficient numbers of decent toilets are to be found nearby. Toddlers in blue uniforms are taught or at least entertained by ladies in carefully pressed pink sarees in the preschool. There is a play area with swings and a slide alongside. Beyond that are the post office, bank, shop and telecommunications centre. Older children get their lessons too, including several hundred A Level candidates. There is even a vocational training school, where some of the 20,000 residents are offered courses in woodwork, dressmaking, motor mechanics and computing. People here don't bother to approach visitors. However, when the officer accompanying me asked at the queue for the telephone if anybody could speak Sinhala, a middle-aged man from near Mullaitivu stepped forward. Having started to talk, it emerged that his English was better than my Sinhala, although he was a farmer, so we switched. He had been in the IDP camp for several months and was clearly unhappy, although he stressed that the facilities were acceptable. With a somewhat resigned look on his face, he shrugged, saying that he had nothing to do. This should worry those who believe that these people need to be held until the last cadre is flushed out. In Menik Farm Zone 0, the residents are quite comfortable, they have opportunities for education, facilities for games and other social activities, and they can even go to other zones to work as labourers, for which they are paid. Yet they feel their confinement intensely. I'm not sure that I see the point in this strategy any longer, although I must admit that I don't have the expertise in security matters to make a proper judgement. All the LTTE leaders are dead, some 9,500 cadres have surrendered or been identified by the Army and are in rehabilitation centres. Meanwhile, it is rumoured that people with money have been able to buy their way out of the IDP camps. If there were any chance that this is true, compelling 280,000 people to stay on in Vavuniya would be mad. The last cadre is probably already here amongst us in any case, with his or her arms cache intact. The Government will face a number of difficulties in trying to provide the same facilities to all the IDP camps, not least the United Nations and its obsession with basic standards. Wanting to discourage the authorities from keeping people for good is perfectly reasonable, but this is obviously not the intention. Even if the Government abandoned its policy of detention, there would still be people in need of a place to live while their villages were being demined and homes reconstructed. A fair number would probably stay on in the IDP camps. So working to minimum needs can only cause unnecessary suffering. I find it morally outrageous too, seeing as United Nations personnel do not work for basic salaries. Zone 2 at Menik Farm is as bad as things get, with 70,000 people. Although the situation is considerably better than similar camps in other countries, and indeed better than slums here, it is not good enough for us to sit back and relax. White tents are to be seen in what appear to be endless rows in every direction. There are toilets and bathing areas, but not of the kind of quality that ought to be possible with the money available. A middle-aged lady from Bandarawela, whose family has been compelled to move numerous times over the decades, pointed out some of the difficulties. While much of the garbage that had accumulated in the first weeks after their arrival has been cleared up, some remains. Many people have been able to start their own cooking, but not all. There are very few areas in which the residents can gather, other than on a patch of dirt with the sun beating down on them, let alone places suitable to hold lessons for children. Nevertheless, life goes on. A group of kids was playing cricket as we passed through. Several residents have turned the front of their tents into shops, selling bits and pieces to their neighbours. We saw one lady busy with a sewing machine. These people coped in much worse conditions in the Vanni, and that's without considering the dangers of the conflict. Even if facilities don't improve, they are better off than they were a couple of months ago. The stories of disappearances, rapes, starvation and epidemics are clearly propaganda. I know that now, and I am glad that I had the chance to see for myself. The Government deserves a lot more credit for its work than it has been given. The situation is in hand, at least for the moment. Readers may not like to take my word for it either, but there are plenty of others working on the ground on a daily basis. The people that I spoke to didn't have anything different to say, and it is up to the Government to make sure that none of us have any reason to change our minds in the weeks to come.

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