
Visiting the Vavuniya IDP camps: an uplifting experience

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The photographs by Thilak Bandara – taken during our visit on July 1, 2009 to some of the Zone 1 IDP camps on the outskirts of Vavuniya town in Sri Lanka’s mainland North – speak for themselves. They are testimony to the Sri Lankan government’s efforts, with international assistance, to care for a brave and resilient Tamil community, which will be resettled and rehabilitated in the next few months through an ambitious programme.

Colombo: The last phase of Sri Lanka’s low-intensity military conflict saw the elimination of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as a military force. It simultaneously witnessed a poignant human drama in which some 300,000 Tamil civilians were rescued by force of arms from a terrorist organisation that, claiming to fight for their freedom, had no compunction in using them as a human shield. Most of these internally displaced Sri Lankans are now housed and cared for by the government in transitional relief camps located in five demarcated zones of the 1500-acre Menik Farm on the outskirts of the town of Vavuniya in the mainland North. International concern has been expressed over the present condition and the future of these Tamil civilians, who include a large number of children, women, and senior citizens.

Following a three-hour conversation, including a recorded interview, with President Mahinda Rajapaksa at ‘Temple Trees’ in Colombo, I had, at his suggestion and thanks to the helicopter and other facilities provided by the Defence Ministry, the opportunity of seeing for myself how the Tamil IDPs were being sheltered and cared for in the camps. It was an uplifting experience, which is reflected in some measure in the photographs by Thilak Bandara published on this page. The sight of tens of schoolchildren returning from makeshift schools and of the distribution by the Controller of Examinations and his team of preparatory material for the A-level exams, which will be taken in a month, was special. What became clear during the visit to Anandakumaraswamy Village in Zone 1, through glimpses of other camps in the vast IDP relief complex, and in conversations in Tamil with some of the displaced people was this. Conditions in these camps are much better than what has been depicted, mostly second-hand, that is, without visiting the camps, in western media reports. Moreover, they are visibly better than conditions in Sri Lankan refugee camps in India, which are still mostly inaccessible to journalists, researchers, and other outsiders. Basic needs, including education for the schoolchildren and vocational training for older boys and girls, are being met by the Sri Lankan government with assistance from the United Nations, a number of countries, including India, and more than 50 INGOs.

Hearteningly, the best hospital in the Menik Farm IDP relief complex is the one staffed and provisioned by the Indian Medical Team with its eight doctors, four nurses, and overall strength of 60, including senior and junior paramedics. After this highly skilled and dedicated medical team, led by Dr. K. Vasantha Kumar, moved to Settikulam from Pulmodai (in the East) in March, it has treated close to 13,000 Tamil civilians and performed several surgical operations. In his interview, which will be published in The Hindu on Monday, President Rajapaksa claimed, without exaggeration, that “the condition in the camps is the best any country has.” He admitted some “shortcomings,” chief among them being a lack of “freedom of movement.” But he also emphasised his responsibility for the security of his people and pointed to the need to speed up the work of de-mining in the heavily mined Wannai, which needed to be certified by the U.N. He reiterated his personal commitment to resettle all the Tamil civilians speedily. The Sri Lankan government is now confident that the President’s 180-day resettlement plan can be implemented. This confidence would have been boosted by the unexpected success of the first meeting of the All Parties Committee for Development and Reconciliation, in which all parties, including the Tamil National Alliance, promised cooperation and support to the project of reconciliation and development in the North. Brigadier S. Perera, who has responsibility for the Vavuniya IDP complex. Photo: N.Ram.Courtesy: hindu.com