



வடகிழக்கு மனித உரிமைகள் செயலகம்

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Meeting the needs of the IDPs – July 2008

The number of people displacing within the Vanni area is steadily on the increase. The focus of displacement has shifted from Mannar to Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu where more than 100,000 IDPs are seeking shelter and relief and many are at present living under trees without much relief reaching them. This report details the problems facing the relief agencies in meeting the urgent needs of the displaced.



An IDP child with her mother and siblings in the background in Kilinochchi in July 2008

IDP items banned

IDPs need to be provided with cooking utensils, plastic buckets, clothing, basic food items and a regular supply of drinking water. The area where they have settled needs to be sprayed for mosquitoes. Children among them must be provided with specific high nutrition food because they face dangers of malnutrition due to shortage of food available to the IDPs.

The relief agencies face restrictions in providing all of these items. The following items cannot be taken into Vanni because they are banned by the Sri Lanka military: aluminum cooking utensils and buckets, plastic buckets, large 1000 liters plastic water tanks for supplying drinking water and permission was refused to bring even some types of clothing. Provision of drinking water and food items to the IDPs is also problematic as explained below under the headings “transportation problems” and “convoy problems”.

As if the problems faced by the relief agencies due to banning of the items listed above is not enough, even the bags that are used for putting the relief items for handing over to the refugees are banned.

For example, the World Food Program (WFP) provides food in large bags made of thin strips of woven plastic which is popularly called “Ura bag”. But the Sri Lanka military is banning these “Ura bags” coming into Vanni because they may be used for sand bagging bunkers.

Ban on cement also creates big problems in providing toilets for the IDP camps.

Other items banned

For interest sake some of the other items banned by the Sri Lanka military are listed below:

- generators of all varieties,
- solar panels for generating household electricity using sunlight,
- batteries,
- toilet blockage removing equipment,
- electrical items of all types including electrical wires and holders
- water pump,
- bicycles,
- sewing machines and
- spades and mammoties for gardening

Permission to bring some of the above items, such as bicycles, sewing machines and water pumps, were requested by an INGO for projects aimed at improving the livelihood of the people. Despite the nature of the project, that INGO was denied permission to bring these items.

Please also see our report on “Siege on health services in Vanni” for a description on the banning of medicines.

Transportation problems within Vanni

The stringent restriction imposed by the Sri Lanka military at the Omanthai checkpoint in bringing fuel into Vanni affects all civilian activities including that of UN, INGOs, local NGOs and Sri Lankan Government Departments. These are the institutions that come to the aid of the IDPs at times like this. All of these institutions face fuel restrictions affecting their ability to visit IDP locations to carry out IDP work.

Provision of drinking water to IDPs requires ongoing refilling of water tanks placed among the IDPs. This requires a lot of fuel. As mentioned above even the plastic water tanks that retain the drinking water are banned by the Sri Lanka military.

Some of the local NGOs as well as local people have modified their motorbikes which run on petrol to run on kerosene because it is cheaper and a little bit more easily available. Starting a converted motorbike like this is an arduous effort and it is indeed a common sight to see mothers picking their young children from preschools struggling to start their motorbikes.

However, even kerosene is being restricted and the amount allowed into Vanni has been gradually reduced.

Convoy problem

Every truck that passes the Omanthai checkpoint from the south of the island into Vanni must download its entire cargo on platforms at the Omanthai checkpoint. Once the Sri Lanka military checks the cargo, it must be reloaded into the trucks. This is a very time consuming task that not only increases the price of items in Vanni but also creates shortages because the numbers of trucks that can pass through the Omanthai checkpoint in a day is limited by the military.

The number of trucks that made their way into Vanni was gradually reduced from what used to be about 30 trucks of goods and a further number of tankers of fuel per day in mid 2007 to just 20 trucks+tankers in total per day at present. What is worse, the cargo trucks belonging to the UN which are checked and sealed in Colombo and are not unloaded for checking at Omanthai are also included in this limit of 20 trucks and tankers per day. This is barely enough to bring the required goods into Vanni. Therefore, when the route is closed for even a day, it has a huge impact on the amount of goods that reaches Vanni.

The trucks that return from Vanni to south for reloading of items face even more stringent checking. In fact there is a limit of seven vehicles of all types that are allowed to cross Omanthai check point from Vanni to the south in one day. This limit includes all vehicles not just trucks and tankers but also passenger vehicles belonging to UN and INGOs. As a result at times items are not brought into Vanni due to shortage of trucks created by a backlog of them stagnating in Vanni.

The situation of the restrictions on convoy movement changes all the time but there is an ongoing struggle to keep the numbers at just adequate level to supply Vanni. These restrictions placed on trucks moving either way creates huge problems in bringing even the approved food items into Vanni. So much so, when the large waves of IDPs needed urgent food relief there was no food stock to supply the IDPs. ***For almost a month the IDPs in Kilinochchi are being provided with just rice which was purchased within Vanni.***

The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) report published by UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Agencies (UNOCHA) in its report for the first week of July said, “*WFP is only able to provide rice and oil for the Kilinochchi distribution as other intended items for the food basket have not been allowed into the Vanni in sufficient quantities to replenish stocks*”.

It is not hard to imagine the effect this will have on the nutritional intake of the IDP children.

The war on civilians

The large scale displacement caused by shelling of the civilian areas, and then the limiting of the relief that reaches the displaced people through blockades at many levels such as the banning of all kinds of ordinary essential items, the limiting of the number of cargo trucks, and the restrictions on fuel, all effectively shows that the war in Vanni is a war against civilians as much as against the LTTE.

IDP plight

It is good to be reminded about the background of the IDPs who are displacing in such large numbers inside Vanni at present.

Veerakathy Thillainadarasa aged 47 displaced from Nedunkerni in Vavuniya to Oddusuddan in Mullaithivu a few weeks ago. She says,



“I have lost count of the number of times we have displaced. In 1984, there was a massacre of 32 men from our village of Othiyamalai. My husband was one of those killed. At that time I was 25 years old and my husband was 26. We had a three year old and I was five months pregnant. Following the massacre we displaced to another village and the villagers fed us and accommodated us. Later I went and joined my brother in Nedunkerni.

We returned to our home in Othiyamali in 1987 when the Indian army was here. When Sri Lanka military came again I went back to Nedunkerni. In 1998 during Sri Lanka military offensives we all displaced from Nedunkerni to Mallavi and went back to Nedunkerni in 2000.

My village Othiyamalai, after very long dark times that began in 1984, saw the light in 2000. We had the courage to go back to Othiyamalai only in 2002. When we went there it was like a graveyard. With the help of neighbors we cleared my land and began cultivation.

In 2006, Sri Lanka military started shelling our area and we displaced again back to Nedunkerni. My brother there allocated a piece of land for me to grow vegetables to earn an income.

We were forced out of Nedunkerni a few weeks ago and we displaced to here to Oddusuddan. I had a large onion harvest in Nedunkerni that could have been harvested in about 20 days when we were forced to displace.”

Yogeswary Ponnambalam aged 37 also from Othiyamalai also displaced from Nedunkerni in Vavuniya to Oddusuddan in Mullaithivu a few weeks ago. She lost her father in the 1984 massacre in Othiyamalai when she was 13 years old. Her family has also been through multiple displacements. She says,



“After the killing of my father in 1984 we went to Katkulam in Vavuniya but we did not feel safe in that village so we displaced to Mamadhu. During Sri Lankan military offensive in 1998 we displaced to Puliyankulam. Then we moved again in a short time to Naddankandal. We kept displacing to Madhu and then to Thadnchanamadhu. In 1999 when the army came to Madhu we came to Vavuniya and stayed in a refugee camp. We came to Othiyamalai only after the CFA. After my father’s death, our mother earned our livelihood by working for daily wages.

I cannot walk because my legs are affected by Polio. When I was 17, I stayed in the Jaffna hospital for 18 months for an operation to put a plate in my leg that enabled me to walk. I worked as a preschool teacher in my village, Othiyamalai, from 2005. I had a fall and the plate in my leg broke. I had an appointment at the Jaffna hospital to replace it. But before the appointment time came the route to Jaffna was closed. Now I can’t walk.

After coming here as IDPs, we are struggling without even one meal a day.”