

# **Sri Lanka: Humanitarian Disaster In Making**

Thursday 30 April 2009, by [RAMAKANT Bobby](#) (Date first published: 30 April 2009).

Activists expressed their deep anguish and concern on unabated mass killings in Sri Lanka which is, as they underlined, “no short of a humanitarian disaster in northern Sri Lanka”.

“We also protest the covert provision of economic and military aid to Sri Lanka by Indian government which has, certainly, deeply aggravated the situation in Sri Lanka” said Dr Sandeep Pandey, Ramon Magsaysay Awardee (2002) and Convener of National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM).

The Sri Lankan government’s indiscriminate military actions have exacted an appalling toll on the civilian Tamil population. Unless India does its part to negotiate an immediate ceasefire, civilian casualties will continue to escalate, tarnishing India’s claim to be a morally responsible regional ‘spiritual’ power.

“Indeed, we have watched with growing dismay the Indian government’s effective complicity with the Sri Lankan government’s ongoing efforts to brutalize the Tamil minority. There is considerable evidence that, while publicly calling for a “political solution”, the Indian government has covertly supplied military equipment and training to Sri Lanka through the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and other Indian intelligence outfits. Decades ago, sending in the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka had exacerbated the situation and questions India’s claim of being a harbinger of ‘peace’ in the region” said Gurudayal Singh Sheetal, Leader of Prakritik Manav Kendrit Andolan, Punjab.

In July 2007, Sri Lanka’s army chief, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, had told journalists that India was training 800 officers annually, free of charge, describing India’s support as “huge”. “Furthermore, there are credible reports indicating that India’s support for the Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksha government is based on base economic calculations: that Tamil areas destroyed by Sri Lanka’s ferocious military offensive will offer lucrative investment opportunities for Indian companies under the guise of helping Tamils living there” said the press statement issued today by People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Uttar Pradesh state chapter.

If these reports are true, India’s economic and political gain will have been purchased in blood and lives. The humanitarian situation in northern Sri Lanka is now catastrophic. According to Human Rights Watch and Sri Lankan rights groups, since January 2009 alone, at least 1,000, and perhaps as many as 2,000, Tamil civilians have been killed as a result of the Sri Lankan military’s continuing artillery attacks and aerial bombing offensive. The military has openly targeted urban areas, including schools, hospitals, and buildings that house civilians.

The Sri Lankan government, believing it is on the verge of final victory over the LTTE, has resisted all calls for a ceasefire. President Rajapaksha has made it clear during the recent visit of UN Special Envoy Vijay Nambiar (on 17 April 2009) that he is not ready to abandon his line of “war to the finish”.

The government is keeping those who have managed to flee the onslaught in detention camps that it has cynically and misleadingly termed “welfare villages”. Arguing that the population of internally

displaced people includes “terrorists” in its ranks, the Sri Lankan government has announced plans to hold up to some 250,000 civilians – even very young children – in the camps for a period of three years. It has requested funds from the UN and other aid agencies to build schools, banks and hospitals inside these camps. There is credible fear that, while detaining this population, the Sri Lankan government will settle majority Sinhalese in northern Sri Lanka.

The recent appeal issued by the Indian External Affairs Ministry “to the Sri Lankan Government and to all concerned to work out appropriate and credible procedures for the evacuation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to safety, which would include the international agencies being able to oversee the movement of the IDPs” is a step in the right direction. But it is not enough.

“We demand an immediate durable and unconditional ceasefire to enable peace negotiations” said SR Darapuri, Vice President of People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Uttar Pradesh state chapter. “We demand formation of credible teams of international human rights activists, medical personnel and social workers to be present in the process of helping the civil population in the ‘Vanni’ to get access to food, water and medical supplies and to safeguard their human rights, sanity and dignity in the transition. Special care needs to be taken to protect, women, children and youth” added Darapuri.

“We demand de-mining and restoration of villages so that peoples right to return to their homes can be safeguarded and implemented. We demand a political process in which all communities will be able to participate with confidence and equal rights, irrespective of ethnicity, language, caste, creed and gender” further added SR Darapuri.

“The Tamil people’s right to self-determination must be respected and implemented. Disappearances and other violence must end and freedom of the press must be guaranteed. The working classes must be able to form organisations and struggle for people’s rights to Life and Livelihood. We demand that India should challenge the Sri Lankan government’s proposal for compulsory confinement of these refugees in detention camps for as long as three years” said Darapuri, while reading the charter of demands activists are making on the governments of India and Sri Lanka.

There is no evidence in history where violence has been a solution to the problems of community, said Dr Ramesh Dixit, Professor of Political Science, Lucknow University. “Dialogue, not war, can lead to solutions” said Dr Dixit.

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\* From Citizen News Service (CNS), 30 April, 2009.