

# **Water pumps and chickens: Rhetoric vs. reality in Northern Sri Lanka**

Tuesday 15 February 2022, by [SATKUNANATHAN Ambika](#) (Date first published: 22 January 2022).

**Nearly 13 years after the end of the war, the communities in the North are yet to recover from the social, economic, and psychological impact of the armed conflict. The pandemic and worsening economic crisis have pushed them, particularly people in places like Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, further into poverty. Food insecurity is real. Poverty is visible. Many families, especially women-headed households, have no income and say they have been forced to reduce their meals to one a day.**

The wife of a person detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) has to care for her five-year-old child as well as her husband's two brothers, one with serious heart disease and the other with severe psychological illness. Hence, both cannot work. Her husband was the main income earner. She has a few coconut trees at home and now survives by selling the yield. As she has no one to care for the child, it is difficult for her to seek employment outside the home.

When the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) arrested her husband, they seized his phone and she had to pawn her earrings to buy a phone for Rs. 4,900. Her parents died in the war and she has no family support. Her husband told her not to visit him in prison and to instead "use the money spent on travel to eat". She said they find it "difficult to even eat every day".

A 53-year-old woman, whose entire family, except her sister, were killed during the last stages of the war, cares for her sister's teenage grandchildren after her sister's death. She used to buy vegetables and re-sell them at a small shop, but her business has suffered due to the pandemic. She also recently broke her arm and cannot ride the bicycle to transport the vegetables to her shop.

A woman who sustained head injuries during the war, due to which she has recurring health problems, is the sole income earner in the family as her husband is ill. She used to engage in manual labour, which has decreased due to the pandemic. She requires new lenses for her spectacles but is unable to buy them as she does not have the required Rs. 5,000.

Civil society organisations do provide livelihood assistance. Yet, not only are they unable to meet the increasing need, but the majority of assistance provided only helps people meet their daily food and other basic requirements. It does not permit saving or enable social mobility. The current circumstances of these persons will prevent their children from accessing educational opportunities that may enable social mobility and economic security, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

## **Families of the disappeared and the missing**

"What we need now, however, is to set aside the dark memories of the past and build a secure country where all sections of the community can co-exist in peace...The issue of missing persons in war is not something unique to a particular group. We will do maximum justice on behalf of all such persons" – President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's policy speech to Parliament, 18 January 2022

Families of the disappeared continue to struggle for truth and justice in the midst of surveillance, intimidation and harassment. Although many families seek justice, not everyone is able to agitate openly for it as they did post-2015 due to the repressive environment.

The precarious economic conditions of many families of the disappeared have worsened since the pandemic. Despite this, many are steadfast in their rejection of compensation or any form of economic support from the Government because they fear it might be used at some point by the State to deny the disappearance took place or to discredit families' demands for truth and justice.

There are also families that, to date, have not complained about the disappearance or the missing person to any State mechanism, such as the Human Rights Commission, Office on Missing Persons (OMP) or any Presidential commission. Therefore, these disappeared and missing persons would not have been included in the official statistics on disappearances and the missing or in the statistics of entities, such as the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances.

A few persons said they complained only to Joseph Camp. A woman who complained only to the Joseph Camp about her husband and daughter who went missing at different periods during the last stages of the war, no longer has the document they issued her. She said that since she is a daily wage earner, she cannot spend time searching for information about their fate. A woman whose husband went missing in 2006 in Muhamalai during battle had reported it only to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). She said she does not search for information about his fate because she will only lose her daily income and believes that "if a solution is found, it will be for everyone".

Many of these persons, often women with no other family except children, obtained death certificates and even compensation for the disappeared person after the end of the war. However, they still consider the person to have disappeared or missing and do not consider them dead. Their reasons for obtaining compensation at the time range from pressure from State officials or economic compulsion.

A woman whose husband was injured on 17 May 2009, was taken to a medical point in the Army-controlled area and then disappeared, has complained only to the ICRC. She has three children who are now teenagers. At the time she obtained a death certificate as she needed the compensation of Rs. 100,000 because the children were young, and she had no sustainable livelihood or family support.

There are cases of disappearances where the immediate family members of the disappeared persons are no longer alive. In these cases, it is the relatives who still speak of the disappearance. A woman spoke of her disappeared niece, who her now deceased sister and brother-in-law had registered as a disappeared person only with the ICRC. It should be noted that these persons, who wish to know the fate of the disappeared person, would not be considered family by the State, and thus will not be eligible to claim any support provided to families of the disappeared, such as the Rs. 6,000 allowance granted during the Yahapalana Government but has been discontinued since.

### **Who is the threat?**

"By now, our Government has secured national security. People have no fear of terrorism today" - President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's policy speech to Parliament, 18 January 2022

Militarisation abated during Yahapalana. But it did not stop, nor were any demilitarisation efforts initiated. It increased after November 2019. Militarisation is both visible and invisible. It is visible, in

the form of large military camps, military-run farms and military personnel, etc. And invisible and insidious, in the form of locals enlisted to surveil particular groups.

More than a decade after the end of the armed conflict, the challenges faced by former combatants have worsened. The surveillance continues. During a visit to an area where many former combatants reside, a now familiar process took place. Within a few minutes, local men known to be working with security agencies arrived on bicycles, parked their bicycles a few metres from the house and sat on a stoop by the road until the visitors left the house of a former combatant. Some former combatants said the last time the security agencies 'checked' on them was a couple of years ago, while others said they had received visits six months ago. Some said they received visits three months ago.

Like other marginalised groups, the economic precarity of former combatants has worsened. Pre-pandemic, many former combatants engaged in manual labour or agriculture. During the pandemic manual work has decreased and agriculture has been affected by the import ban on fertilisers. A former combatant said he worked as a mason but jobs had drastically reduced because of the increase in the price of sand and cement, which has halted construction.

The lack of livelihood options has reportedly pushed some into livelihood generation activities that are exploitative or illegal, such as brewing illicit alcohol, thereby making them vulnerable to criminalisation and possible incarceration. Thus, repeating the cycle of poverty, imprisonment and marginalisation.

### **Precarious lives vs. the privilege of 'positivity'**

The possibility of forward movement in the national reconciliation process is possibly the only silver lining in the gloomy situation that the country is in – Jehan Perera, 'Generating and Erasing Hope of Reconciliation,' Colombo Telegraph, 11 January 2022

A water pump is the most commonly requested form of assistance one encounters. Or requests for chickens or a cow. Requests that may enable people to engage in small-scale cultivation or livelihood generation activities which will only be adequate to meet basic needs. But that is all they ask. The fact they ask for so little demonstrates that their focus is limited to survival and has been for a long time.

Their struggle for survival is celebrated as resilience. The fact that they are in a position where survival is considered an achievement, and their vision for their own lives is limited to the bare minimum required to survive, is a devastating indictment not only of the State but also of political parties and society.

These people do not have the privilege of 'positivity'.

They see no silver lining. At least, not right now. They probably have not for a long time.

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