

Canadian Tamil Congress



Commentary

A Forgotten Generation:

The effect of the civil conflict on Tamil children in the North and East of Sri Lanka

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Executive Summary

The effects of the civil conflict on children are dealt with. 270,000 children have been displaced within the country. The imposing of food embargos has resulted in a 40%-60% of the children being malnourished compared to 7% in the rest of the country. Literacy levels have dropped drastically from a high of 80%. Hundreds of cases of sexual assault by the security forces have been reported. Reports of torture and massacre are numerous. Psychosocial problems have also been reported. These and other factors have contributed to the spiraling pattern of violence.

The purpose of this presentation is to factually portray the worsening humanitarian crisis occurring in the North and East of Sri Lanka, an area that a majority of the Tamils consider to be their home. Attention has been largely focused on the children, the most vulnerable section of society. Almost all of the similar studies and surveys conducted by the Sri Lankan government confine themselves to the Southern of the Island areas on the plea that access to the North and East is not readily available due to the conflict situation. Additionally, a factual report would only quantify the government's discriminatory activities and provide international NGO's, the public and the media with the information of the ongoing humanitarian crises in the Tamil areas.

Introduction

Sri Lanka, the tear-shaped island off the southern tip of India, is 25, 332 sq. mi., approximately the size of West Virginia. It has a population of more than 19 million, of which 74% are Sinhalese and 12% are Tamils. Historically, the island had separate Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms, until the British colonialists unified the country for administrative convenience in 1831.

Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) was granted independence in 1948. This left the Tamils at the mercy of the majority Sinhalese. The governments in power progressively passed legislation that discriminated against the Tamils. Initially, Tamil legislators passively demonstrated against these discriminatory acts. Successive governments met these protests with increasingly violent repressive measures. The first pogrom that was covertly sponsored by the government occurred in 1958. Pogroms occurred with increasing intensity throughout the 1960's and '70's. The Tamil youth disillusioned by the discriminatory and repressive activities of the government took up to arms. In 1983, a massive government organized pogrom occurred island wide. This pogrom received worldwide attention due to the systematic brutality that was inflicted on the Tamil people. Over 3,000 innocent Tamil civilians were massacred while tens of thousands lost their homes and businesses and became internally displaced persons and refugees. This event escalated the conflict to its present level which has continued for over two decades with the loss of over 77,000 Tamil lives.

The conflict has resulted in a humanitarian crisis beyond proportion, relative to the population and size of the country.

The Sri Lankan Government has imposed a rigorous censorship on news from the North and Eastern provinces. “Government criticism of humanitarian agencies working in the conflict areas has led many to remain silent on crucial issues of human rights and humanitarian needs connected to the war.”

Sri Lanka is bereft of any worthwhile exploitable natural resources and is of limited strategic importance interest to the economically advanced countries. This has resulted in the conflict receiving minimal coverage in the international media. This is further compounded by a rigorous censorship imposed by the Sri Lankan Government. The local and international media are not allowed into the conflict areas and the local media have been completely censored numerous times.

The government also has an efficient propaganda machine that provides false or misleading information to the media, resulting in there being no international awareness of the true humanitarian situation in the majority Tamil areas.

The purpose of this presentation is to factually portray the worsening humanitarian crisis occurring in the North and East of Sri Lanka, an area that a majority of the Tamils consider to be their home. Attention has been largely focused on the children, the most vulnerable section of society. Almost all of the similar studies and surveys conducted by the Sri Lankan government confine themselves to the Southern of the Island areas on the plea that access to the North and East is not readily available due to the conflict situation. Additionally, a factual report would only quantify the government’s discriminatory activities and provide international NGO’s, the public and the media with the information of the ongoing humanitarian crises in the Tamil areas.

Chapter One - *Displacement*

The term displacement may to some have a vague or benign meaning. However, to the Tamils in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, displacement is a horrific reality. A Norwegian Refugee Council publications notes, “as of the end of September 2000, the total number of Internally Displaced People (IDP) in Sri Lanka was estimated by UNHCR-Sri Lanka at 800,000. At the beginning of the June 2001, the total number of IDPs is estimated by CARE to be around 800,000.”

This displacement is a result of aggressive military offensives by the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) to capture territories, and continued fighting between the SLA and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The conflict seems unending and without reprieve, for example between July 1995 and March 1997 alone, there were approximately 15 military offensives deployed in the northern and eastern provinces.

The civilians most severely affected in the conflict are Tamil children. According to the US Committee for Refugees, “Most Sri Lankan refugees and displaced persons were Hindu Tamils, although thousands of Muslims and some Buddhist Sinhalese were also displaced.” Sadly, it is estimated that 270,000 of the IDPs are children.

The testaments from displaced families are very disturbing because the displacement usually happens in situations where individuals are forced to leave their homes at a moment’s notice due to government offensives. These civilians fear for their lives due to past instances of indiscriminate bombing and shelling by the government forces. Usually they must leave with little planning and no clarity as to their destination.

The largest documented and most severe displacement was the October 1995 mass exodus of the entire city of Jaffna and most of the peninsula. During a 10-day

period, under pouring monsoon rains, over 750,000 people were forced to flee from the Sri Lankan army's invasion of the peninsula and offensive to capture the Jaffna town. In Dr. S.E Savundra's book on the war, he comments on the deplorable conditions civilians endured during the exodus: "The process of emptying Jaffna commenced and the A9 road leading to Kandy was full of people rushing out of Jaffna with whatever belongings they could carry...it was said that one needed two hours to cover a distance of 50 metres". In another entry, he talks about stories of the exodus conveyed to him from the students of his seminary: "They brought the sad news of the death of babies caused by the stampede. To quench thirst, the fleeing refugees had to drink the rainwater flowing from the umbrellas. The crowd was such that no one could move out of the road till they crossed the bridge."

It is reported that 80% of the houses in Jaffna are damaged, with a significant number destroyed. This leaves IDPs with little remaining to return to; therefore, some IDPs have been in temporary shelters as long as 10 years. Subsequent military operations around the IDPs have pressed them to flee again or return to military occupied Jaffna. An example being the secondary movement of a quarter million people from Killinochchi to the jungles of Vanni. Due to a dynamic war front, people are continuously searching for stability and safety; therefore, multiple displacements are a very common experience. A study conducted by the UNHCR in Madhu of 281 families showed that approximately 31% were displaced 3 times and over 22% were displaced 5 times or more.

The situation in their current shelters and communities is deplorable. The Sri Lankan government restricts the ability of the NGOs to offer support to IDPs, because of this the situation is steadily worsening. Several NGO's and the UN have cited a lack of

cooperation by the SLA as the major obstacle to providing aid to the IDP's.

Displaced children suffer from the Sri Lankan Government's restrictions and embargoes on necessary items like food, medicine and medical supplies to the civilians in the conflict areas. This is a clear violation of the Geneva Protocol. According to Save the Children Norway and Oxfam, 21.6% of the people displaced by the Jayasikuru offensive suffered from malnutrition. Medical institutions are short of medicine, medical supplies, qualified staff and are overwhelmed with emergencies. Children, therefore, do not have the necessary access to even the most basic levels of healthcare. Médecins Sans Frontières has called upon the Sri Lankan Government to "allow the re-supply of urgently needed essential medicines to the northern region of the country." Isabel Simpson, the MSF Head of Mission in Sri Lanka, has said, "The shortage of medications has become so critical that patients are being turned away from hospitals and clinics without receiving the necessary treatment."

Presently, 200,000 IDPs reside in welfare centers, approximately 50% of who are children. Welfare center residents suffer from depression, high suicide rates, malnutrition and high unemployment rates. As per a Médecins Sans Frontières, 50% of the suicide attempts in Vavuniya were at the welfare centers. Due to their dire financial constraints and the improbability of any political solution to the conflict in the near future the IDPs are building long-term dependencies on the NGO's and are in danger of becoming permanently displaced.

As families are continuously displaced, the physical and mental impact on children is alarming. The inconsistency in environment, education, guardians and community has dire psychological effects. Displaced children do not have the necessary

access to nutritious diets and healthcare. A nutritional survey among the displaced people, undertaken in 1997 by Save the Children Norway and Oxfam, revealed a malnutrition rate of 21.6%.

With schools damaged or destroyed, multiple periods of schooling missed due to fighting and displacement, and teaching staff displaced, there is limited access to a structured education for the children in the conflict areas. As per an Oxfam report, an estimated 25% of displaced children are not enrolled in school; moreover, of the children that were enrolled, many were not attending.

The most worrying aspect of displacement is the long-term trauma these children will experience. With no immediate resolution to the conflict in sight, their future prospects are bleak. Without adequate counseling or rehabilitation, these experiences will greatly inhibit their ability to be productive citizens in their communities now and in the future.

Chapter Two - *Health Crisis*

A humanitarian crisis exists in the Tamil dominated areas of Sri Lanka. Due to a concerted effort by the Sri Lankan government to restrict the importation of the required amount of food and medicine into LTTE administered areas, Tamil civilians, especially the children, are left to bear the brunt of malnutrition. Malnutrition affects all aspects of a child's existence and survival. The crisis has been documented by many non-governmental organizations (NGO's). Yet, the Sri Lankan government has repeatedly rejected the calls by the international community for the relaxation of the embargo on food and medicine into the Vanni.

In 1997, a nutritional survey undertaken by Save the Children and Oxfam in December 1997 among displaced people fleeing the Government's military offensive code named Jayasikuru ("Sure Victory") offensive revealed a malnutrition rate of 21.6 per cent. Now in 2001, according to the British Refugee Council, aid agencies estimate that 40% of the children in the Vanni are undernourished or malnourished. In Mullaitivu district, third-degree malnutrition among children, beyond which level the child develops an extended stomach, an expanded liver and a skinny frame, is around 40 percent. The Norwegian agency Redd Barna says under nutrition among children in the Vanni was as high as 67%.

Malnutrition in the LTTE held areas of Sri Lanka exists due to the Sri Lankan government's refusal to allow adequate food to be distributed through to these areas. This is compounded by the blanket embargo that also covers essential medicines to these areas. The government disputes the population figures provided by its government agents and provides dry rations for only half of the actual displaced population. Having no

choice, the government agent distributes what is provided to the entire displaced population. As a result, a displaced family receives only Rs. 315 (about US\$6.30) worth of food per month, and even this distribution is very irregular. The Catholic Bishop of Mannar, Rayappu Joseph, who visited LTTE-controlled areas in the Vanni recently, says that only 25% of the food and medicines needed is allowed into the region.

In a report to the Sunday Times of London, American journalist Marie Colvin, the only journalist to travel to Wanni areas in the north of the island in many years, documented the extensive embargo brought to bear on the people of the Vanni. Checkpoints at the border between the LTTE and government controlled areas enforce a ban on items ranging from fuel, cement, and plastic sheeting to instant noodles and vegetable oil. Even sanitary towels were not allowed as the government rationalizes that they could presumably be used to dress wounds suffered by the LTTE cadre. The government's efforts have at times worsened the situation, when the Defence Ministry ordered a 30% cut in the food supply to the LTTE controlled areas from January 1st, 2000. Prior to the cut only 240 lorry-loads of food were allowed into Tiger-held territory whereas twice the amount was needed in the area. In a mid-January appeal to the UN, the Vanni Citizens Committee said government and co-operative food stores are depleted and many displaced families have only one meal a day. The shortage of medicines, even that of over the counter medicines such as aspirin, panadol etc., as they are restricted by the Sri Lanka government, has compelled hospitals to issue prescriptions and require patients to purchase medicine themselves, which is a problem because most patients cannot afford to buy medicines from outside sources. Reports say prices in the Vanni are five to ten times higher than in the government controlled southern areas of Sri Lanka. Rice costs

between Rs. 40 and Rs 50 a kilo, sugar Rs 100 a kilo and kerosene Rs 150 a litre. There is also an acute shortage of children's milk food. The United States Department of State has documented the restrictions on essential medicines as follows:

The Government maintained a long list of prohibited 'war-related' medical items, such as sutures, plaster of Paris, intravenous liquid supplies, bandages, and some drugs. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and other groups that sought to take these items to LTTE-controlled areas in the Vanni region needed permission from local officials as well as from the Ministry of Defense (MOD). Delays were common and approval was sometimes denied, due to fear that supplies would fall into the hands of the LTTE. As a result, many medical items in the Vanni region were in short supply.

Despite warnings of medical emergencies in the northern districts, the Sri Lankan authorities continue to block the shipment of essential medical supplies. It is clear that even with knowledge of the adverse impact of its embargo on the innocent civilians of the LTTE administered areas; the government has only intensified the problem in the past few years. One is hence compelled to conclude that Food and Medicine are being used as a weapon of war by the Sri Lankan government. This is a violation of the Geneva Protocols and is a war crime.

The consequences of denying children an adequate diet, access to quality healthcare and lack of medicines is hunger, ill health, and disease. The widespread prevalence of under nutrition and lack of healthcare for pregnant mothers results in underweight newborns. An estimated 23 per cent of displaced children were born

underweight according to a study done by Save the Children and Oxfam in 1987. UNICEF reports that this represents a three fold increase compared to pre-war years. Low nutritional status also affects children's performance at school and there are reports from the Vanni of children fainting in class or being unable to concentrate because they are hungry and lacking in vital minerals and nutrients. The scourge of hunger is well illustrated by the following quote:

Mothers report that their children have developed night blindness and need constant supervision to prevent them from knocking into objects and hurting themselves after dark. There is a lack of vitamin A tablets in hospitals, which is essential for treating night blindness. The minutes of Education Department meetings of principals reveal that three to seven students faint because of hunger in schools on a daily basis. The principals have also reported that sometimes they are forced to close the schools by 10 a.m. because the students cannot cope with schooling without food.

Growth stunting has also been observed by NGOs working in the Vanni. As a result many 12-year-old children have the body structure of 6-8 year olds.

Displaced children are particularly at risk from recurrent illnesses such as diarrhea, respiratory infections and cholera. A shortage of anti-malarial drugs means that malaria poses the greatest threat to the health of displaced children in the Vanni and in Jaffna. During 1997 and 1998, 53% of the 430,240 malaria patients in Sri Lanka were in Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Jaffna districts and 80% of the 177 deaths due to malaria were in these districts. Government Anti-Malaria Campaign Director Dr. Punsiri Fernando says many deaths in the Vanni were caused because of lack of facilities for

proper medical treatment. In the Vanni, the hospital system is 50 per cent understaffed.

Table 1. The following table documents the Health Staffing shortage in the Vanni.

Position	Mannar		Kilinochchi		Mullaitivu	
	Cadre	Vacancy	Cadre	Vacancy	Cadre	Vacancy
Medical Officer	6	6 (100%)	6	4 (67%)	7	4 (57%)
Para Medical Staff	19	11 (58%)	29	17 (59%)	37	11 (30%)
Nursing Officers	68	58 (85%)	39	27 (69%)	50	30 (60%)
Minor Grades	165	129 (78%)	91	65 (71%)	118	87 (73%)

As a result, many displaced children have died, either because they could not reach a hospital quickly enough, or because there were no staff available to treat them when they arrived.

The overall impact of child malnutrition and lack of medicines and health care is well described by the following table.

Table 2. Malnutrition rate of children in Sri Lanka

Region	Vanni	Jaffna District	Sri Lanka	West Province
Infant Mortality	185/1000	41/1000	16.5/1000	<10/1000
Neonatal Mortality	172/1000	35/1000	12/1000	5-10/1000
Child Malnutrition	40-60%	20-25%	7%	<4%

Dr. Jayalath Jayawardene, a member of the Sri Lankan Parliament, observes, whatever sanitary facilities were existent have been damaged and materials and resources

for rebuilding them are not available. Many families defecate in the open fields. Safe drinking water is not available. The security forces do not permit chlorine for sanitized drinking water to be taken into the LTTE held areas.

Special needs children according to Jayawardene are 6% of the school going population and need special attention. Half of them have either lost one or both parents. Insufficient facilities exist to cater for them. The sight impaired, hearing impaired, and otherwise physically disabled are not provided with the minimum facilities they require and deserve.

Chapter Three - *Education*

Education, considered a child's right by the United Nations General Assembly, has traditionally been a cornerstone of the Tamil cultural fabric. However, the educational system is being systematically demolished and is rapidly decaying due to the conflict. Literacy levels in the northern and eastern provinces, which have historically been higher than 80%, have fallen drastically. Unfortunately, for the Tamil children from the Northern and Eastern provinces, there is limited access to structured education due to schools being damaged by bombing and shelling, schools being displaced, a shortage of school supplies, a fear of personal safety, multiple extended periods of schooling missed, and teaching staff displaced.

Firstly, most educational institutions are either severely damaged or serving as shelters for displaced individuals. Jaffna is home to a few colleges, who have proudly celebrated their centennials. Many of these colleges, including Jaffna Central College, a bastion of the educational system built by the Dutch, have suffered from bombing campaigns by the Sri Lankan Army (SLA). Classes are conducted in damaged buildings, thatched huts or under trees. In some cases two or three displaced schools are functioning on premises built for one school.

Due to the restrictions established by the Sri Lankan Government on the delivery of school supplies to the North, schools lack the basic materials, from furniture to paper, needed to function. In his study on the educational system in the northeast region of Sri Lanka, Dr. N. Ethirveerasingam reports, "Writing materials, exercise books, poster papers, even Braille papers, and other instructional material needed to make instructional aids are restricted or banned. The reason given by SLFG authorities who review

applications state that these materials will fall into the hands of the LTTE and will be used for propaganda against the Government. This is a standard response to all items.”

There is a severe shortage of qualified teachers in the system leading to overcrowding in classrooms and a decline in educational standards. “At least 3,350 teachers are currently needed in the region for the 94,000 students, but there are only 1,800 teachers.”

Children are possibly not attending school in fear for their safety; with similar feelings, their guardians are not encouraging their attendance. A recently well-publicized case of the gang rape of a young schoolgirl, Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, by 16 Sri Lankan Army soldiers as she returned from writing exams highlights the dangerous environment youth have to contend with. Ethirveerasingam states in his report, “...arrest and detention, rapes, molestation, torture, disappearances and extra-judicial killings of Tamil youths (by the Sri Lankan Army) are a documented reality.”

Due to inadequate nutrition, the educational development of Tamil school children in the Vanni is stunted. “Inadequate nutrition is a major problem in the Vanni due to government restrictions on food and has had a detrimental effect on children, including students. Only one third of the food needed reaches the region despite protests by agencies. According to experts, under nutrition affects brain development in the early stages and cognitive and educational performance in the long-term.

Continuous displacements have disrupted the normal course of education for Tamil children. As per an Oxfam report, an estimated 25% of displaced children are not enrolled in school; moreover, of the children that were enrolled, many were not attending.

The Norwegian Refugee Council in its report notes, “Due to multi displacement, children have lost the continuity of education and some have lost one or two years of schooling. This makes the children difficult to adjust to the normal curriculum.”

The National Institute of Education is also accused of carrying out a concerted campaign of distorting the history of the Tamil people of the island in several Tamil school textbooks. In 1997, the Ceylon Tamil Teachers’ Union (CTTU) demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Year 6 Tamil textbook for Environmental Studies due to its distorted contents.

Chapter Four - *Sexual Assaults*

Until recently, sexual attack and exploitation were dismissed as the inevitable side effects of armed conflict. A more accurate view is that sexual attacks and exploitation are used systematically during armed conflict to humiliate and terrorize a group of people. Sexual violence is particularly common in ethnic conflicts where it is used in a systematic manner to demoralize a minority group, as is the case in Sri Lanka. Sexual assaults of Tamil women and children by the Sri Lankan government defence forces have been widespread during this twenty-year armed conflict. Hundreds of cases have been reported to international human rights organizations in the past few years alone. However, many more cases are simply not reported, given the socially isolating effect of rape on a Tamil female. A young Tamil girl who has been molested or raped would be treated as a social outcast and would probably not be able to marry subsequently.³ As a result, most of these victims turn to suicide. The Sri Lankan military is fully aware of the devastating effect of rape on the lives of young Tamil females. This is why rape and more precisely the threat of rape is such a powerful weapon in the domination of the Tamil regions.

Although there are numerous cases of rape-murders and hundreds of cases of rapes that have been brought to light by various international human rights organizations, only a few examples are provided in this summary.

The high profile case of a young schoolgirl, Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, was brought to light in 1996. Amnesty International's documents state the following:

On November 7, 1996 Krishanthi Kumaraswamy (age 18) was arrested on her way home from school at the Kaithady army checkpoint. Her mother, Rasamma Kumaraswamy, became anxious when her daughter did not

return from school and went to the checkpoint with Krishanthi's brother, Piranapan (age 16), and a neighbor Kirupaharan. They were also arrested by the soldiers at the checkpoint. At 10 p.m. that night, the soldiers strangled and murdered Krishanthi's mother, brother and neighbor and buried their bodies in shallow graves in the Hindu Chemmani Cemetery. At 11 p.m. 11 soldiers gang raped Krishanthi and then murdered her. Her body was buried in the same cemetery. The four bodies were discovered on 24th October 1996.

In this particular case, due to an outcry from international human rights organizations, the Sri Lankan government filed a case against several soldiers. This was an unusual case as military and police personnel who perpetrate such crimes enjoy full immunity. In some cases, women who had lodged complaints were visited soon after by the soldiers responsible and were raped again.

A more typical case is that of ten-year-old Thenuka Selvarajah. On November 17, 1996 Sri Lankan soldiers abducted her when she was on her way to school and gang-raped her at the Puttur V. C. army camp. Her school principal complained at the main Atchuvvely army camp, in Tamil majority Jaffna peninsula, but he was forcibly removed from the premises and no further investigation was undertaken.

Human rights activists have claimed that police and armed forces personnel rape at least 150 Tamil women and children yearly. This number is a severe underestimate as many victims do not come forward for fear of reprisals and the social stigma attached to rape. Amnesty International has repeatedly appealed to the President of Sri Lanka urging

her to take action to stop rape by security forces and to bring these perpetrators to justice. Unfortunately, almost all cases have collapsed because the perpetrators including the medical examiners responsible for physical examinations of the victims have threatened victims and witnesses.

Rape, torture and murder of children aren't the only manner in which a child's physical and psychological well being is threatened. Oftentimes, children are forced to watch their mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters being raped.

In the case of Koneswary Murugesapillai, a 35-year old mother of four who was gang-raped by five Sri Lankan policemen on May 17, 1997, her two-year-old child was present during the rape. After the rape, the perpetrators inserted a grenade into her vagina, thus killing her.

In August 1995, Lakshmi Pillai was raped at her home in Trincomalee by two army informants in front of her two sons. The motive may have been revenge as she had spoken out about being raped before at Plantain Point army camp in August 1993. The informants were arrested but later released on bail pending trial.

Sexual violence has a devastating impact on children's physical and emotional development. The most immediate dangers are sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, which rapidly damage health, jeopardize future sexual and reproductive functions and may ultimately cause death. The less visible dangers are the humiliation and anguish that may lead girls and young women to withdraw into a shell of pain and denial, or even commit suicide. After the trauma of sexual violence, some adolescent girls suffer in silence. They fear reprisals from those who attacked them or rejection by their families. In addition to being victims of rape themselves, being forced to watch a

heinous crime committed against a loved one could be profoundly damaging to a child's psychological well being.

Chapter Five - *Trauma*

The chronic stress of 20 years of conflict has caused permanent damage to the fabric of Tamil society, especially the children. Except for 2 or three short respites, there has been a continuous economic blockade, including an embargo on essential items, gasoline, electricity and medicine from 1987. Besides the government has resorted to aerial bombing, artillery shells and naval bombardments. The impact of the harsh environmental condition had an insidious effect on the children.

Some of the war stresses affecting the overall population and particularly children of psychosocial significance are dealt with herein.

In the north and east theatre of war, children have grown up witnessing violence, experiencing violence for almost 25 years. This will have a drastic impact on the long-term development of these children:

Use of terror to exert social control, if necessary by disrupting the fabric of grassroots social, economic and cultural relations; the main target if the combatants are often population rather than territory and psychological warfare is a central element. Atrocities of all kinds, including civilian massacres, reprisals, bombings, shellings, mass displacements, disappearances and torture are the norm.

In several instances, young children are often made to witness the brutal rapes of mothers, sisters and relatives or the killing of loved ones. Koneswary a mother of four was raped and killed by a grenade that was inserted in her genitals in an attempt to destroy evidence. The children of Koneswary were forced by the Sri Lankan armed

personnel to witness this brutal rape and murder.

There have been numerous incidences of arrest and torture of children by the security personnel. They are tortured to extract confessional statements. Ehamparam Damayanthi, a 15 year old girl was arrested, sexually assaulted, tortured and detained by Sri Lanka army; Sinnarasa Anthonymala, a 17 year old was also arrested, sexually assaulted, severely tortured and forced to sign statements in Sinhala, a language she could not read or understand; Vallipuram Suganthi, a 15 year old arrested by 12 police officers, severely beaten and was threatened with rape. These are just a few of several such incidences.

The children in the North and East live under continuous life-threatening conditions. Their status as children doesn't prevent the Sri Lankan military from committing horrible atrocities against them. Sixty-eight children under the age of 12 were massacred in one single night in Sathurukkondan in 1990.

The Sri Lankan government has often responded to failure in the battlefields with civilian massacres, indiscriminate aerial bombing and artillery shelling. The targets have ranged from schools to Churches where people had taken refuge. In the case of the bombing of the Nagar Kovil Central School, 25 children were killed on the spot when Sri Lanka Air Force Pucara planes bombed it in 1995.

Government forces have retaliated against unarmed civilians including children as in case of the Kumarapuram massacre where seven children under the age of 12 were massacred.

A wide prevalence of traumatisation was found among students (43%) and a wide variety of behavioural disturbances were reported by parents and teachers in an extensive study (n=305) performed at Vaddukoddai (Jaffna District).

Table 3. Common symptoms in school children (Vaddukkodai)

Symptoms	(n=305) Percentages
Sleep disturbance	77
Separation anxiety	40
Hyper-alertness	50
Sadness	43
Clinging	45
Withdrawal	25
Decline in school performance	60
Irritability	73
Aggressiveness	46
Cruelty	30
Anti-social behaviour	44
War games	54
War vocabulary	64

Source: Somasundaram (1993).

Another study involving a larger adolescent sample population from the North and East, Jaffna, Vaddukkodai (Vadu), Chavakachcheri (Chava), Maddu, Killinochi (Killi), and the Faculty of Agriculture (agri), gives a clear indication of the psychosocial problems in adolescents.

Table 4. Psychosocial problems in adolescents (%)

Psychosocial problems	Jaffna n=200	Vadu n=211	Chava n=60	Maddu n=60	Killi n=48	Agri n=46
PTSD	31	36	18	15	50	44
Somatisation	68		17	71	44	
Anxiety	38	38	22	40	40	33
Depression	25	36	30	17	27	44
Hostility	59	33	57	37	63	30
Relationships problems	24	25	50	23	58	30
Alcohol & drug abuse				02	19	20
Functional disability		33	78	20	54	35
Cognitive						

impairment						
Loss of memory	46	28	57	48	65	37
Loss of concentration	33	35	58	55	60	57
Loss of motivation			60	35	56	50

Source: Somasundaram (1993).

In another study undertaken by Robbie Chase (2000) that involved 170 school children from the East Coast gives a good indication of the post-traumatic psychological distress, grief and depression.

Exposure to war Experience	% of children affected - Batticaloa (n=170)
Disrupted schooling and displacement of home, multiple occasions	90%
Forced separation from parents (longer than one month)	15%
Direct exposure to shelling, shooting and/or bombing	89%
Extreme poverty and deprivation due to the war e.g. going without a home, food, or water	80%
Seeing dead bodies	53%
Direct family member killed by war fighting	15%
Disappearance of family member (following abduction or detention, presumed dead)	19%

The findings as reported by Bush (2000) indicates that: “41% of the children were personal victims of conflict related violence such as their home attacked, being shot at, beaten, tortured or arrested. 95% reported personally experiencing or witnessed or experienced events of threatened death, serious injury, or threat to be at risk of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): 92% of the events reported by the children as traumatic were directly related to armed conflict (as opposed to e.g. domestic violence, accident,

etc.)

Conclusion

It can be seen there has been a deliberate and insidious effort to destroy the very fabric of Tamil society away from the eyes of the international community. The consequence of children being systematically denied the physical and mental necessities of life would be an effective retardation of the development of Tamil society for several generations to come. It is now urgently necessary for all concerned, particularly the legislators, to rethink their attitudes and implement remedial measures.

Solutions exist and it is necessary for international pressure to be exerted to implement them.

The international community should adopt a more positive attitude to stem the further deterioration of the humanitarian situation by providing direct assistance, in the form of expertise and finances independent of government dictates and directions. The international community should also pressure the government of Sri Lanka to enter into negotiations with the LTTE in the presence of a third party mediator. The need for a political solution is paramount. A generation of children has known nothing but the horrors of war and have been deprived of an education; these children are in danger of becoming a lost generation.

Considering the fact that the armed conflict in Sri Lanka has been going on for some 15 years, it is evident that the children have been severely affected. There is hardly any child in the affected areas who has been able to “live a child’s life”. One can truly talk of a lost childhood. To put it somewhat bluntly, there is no right of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that is not at stake. However, one could try to establish

which right, at the moment, would be the most important to address. It appears that it comes down to most to the basic level of guarantee a child's right to life, survival and development, as well as the right to social intergration and psychosocial recovery.

- *UNICEF United Nations Children Fund Mission to Sri Lanka, 1998.*

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