

## ***Voice of the Voiceless and Helpless people of Vanni***

This report comes out as the voice of the voiceless and helpless people of Vanni who had taken refuge in about four Grama Niladaris divisions situated along a tiny coastal stretch of the Bay of Bengal (Eastern Coast of Sri Lanka.)

Almost the entire population of Vanni has come into the 'Safe Area' declared by the Government, consisting of the villages of Palaya Mathalan, Puthu Mathalan, Ambalavan Pokkanai, Valaignar Madam, and Multiwaikkal. This small stretch of land has become the utterly abandoned region in Asia and the people are forced to live on the fringes of human existence. Death and starvation and sickness continue to threaten them and the voice of these beleaguered people are not adequately brought out to light or not justifiably represented.

Further on, on the one hand, information coming out from Vanni is considered one sided, unreliable or exaggerated. On the other hand, truths about Vanni brought out by the International Organisations such as the UN, the ICRC, the HRW, and by a few International Media such as the BBC, and the CNN are inadequate. In this pathetic backdrop, this voice for Justice and Peace was born and comes out from Vanni in the form of this report.

**We intend to highlight the following in this report.**

1. The geographical features of the Safe Area.
2. The population of Vanni living in the Safe Area.
3. Existential struggles of the people.
4. Reliability of the safe area
5. Freedom of movement.
6. Food crisis.
7. Health crisis.
8. Forced Recruitment.
9. The plight of the Escapees.
10. Ecological Impact.

### **1. The Geographical Features of the Safe Area.**

The Safe Area declared by the Government is a narrow stretch of arid land. It is about 12 KM long from palaya mathalan to Mulliwaikkal and about 500M wide where people live. The area surrounding this human habitation turns salty and clay—hardened under scorching sun and gets flooded when it rains. (At present, it is extremely hot during the day and very cold at night.)

### **2. The population.**

Highly controversial statistics about the population of Vanni is in circulation. The government claims that there are about 70,000 people. Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, the

Indian Foreign Minister, claims 90,000, and the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr. M. Karunanithy claims 100,000, and the Government officials in Vanni claim that there are about 81,000 families consisting of about 330,000 people. Such data are surprising and dangerous too. It is surprising that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, considered the era of Communications Technology, such divergent data exist. It is dangerous, since the statistics on the population impinges on areas of concern such as food, health, shelter, medicine, and provision of other basic facilities. Therefore it is necessary that an impartial survey is undertaken in order to ascertain the actual population of Vanni. However, according to us who live in Vanni, there are more than 330,000 people from Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, and parts of Vavunia, Mannar, and Jaffna districts.

### **3. Existential struggles of the people.**

A narrow stretch of a coastal belt accommodating a large population gives rise to untold humanitarian crises. People, by and large, live in tarpaulin tents, closely knit to one another. There is hardly any space between the tents and such a congested living makes the people vulnerable to the onslaught of epidemics. No sewage system is available and water gets collected in pools and remains stagnant and becomes breeding ground for mosquitoes etc. Temporary wells and toilet pits are found in close proximity and contamination becomes inevitable. The Safe Area is naturally limited in drinking water resources and an excessive consumption of water makes the wells run dry or turn salty. Due to lack of toilet facilities the 12 KM coastal belt emanates a terrible stench.

On the whole, the situation in Safe Area is much worse than that is found in the slums scattered around large cities of Asia. A cultured and civilized group of people have been brought so low, is highly regrettable.

### **4. Reliability of the Safe Area.**

Poundings of the artilleries and bullets from guns continue to take their toll of the innocent civilians in the Safe Area itself. Attacks, counter attacks and provocative attacks lead to deaths and injuries. In short, the people do not feel secure in the Safe Area. The Safe Area declared earlier, in Visvamaadu, and Oddusuddan and from Thevipuram to Udayarkattu, and the horrendous events which unfolded there have been deeply etched in the minds and hearts of the people. Averages of 30 to 50 people are killed and many more are wounded daily. Occasionally the number killed goes beyond 70 or 80 and the number of injured goes well beyond 100. As a result, most of the tents have got inbuilt bunkers. Perhaps this could be the only Safe Area in Asia which contains such a large number of bunkers.

However, the present Safe Area was considered comparatively better than the previous ones by the people. People got killed in clusters like insects and worms and there was no time for a decent burial at all, earlier. At times, those killed were abandoned like dead animals in the face of incessant shelling. There were no mortuaries at the hospitals. No coffins were available due to shortage of wooden planks. Dead bodies abandoned or buried in a hurry were never recorded. Only the dead bodies brought to the hospitals

were recorded. Who would dare to risk ones life in order to retrieve a dead relative amidst intense and indiscriminate shelling? Compared to these gruesome events in the previous Safe Area, horrors were less in the present Safe Area. However, the present Safe Area is fast turning out to be equally, if not more dangerous and gruesome!

## 5. Freedom of Movement.

The displaced people are unable to choose the place they like which they consider safe. Both the parties to the conflict obstruct such moves of the people. The Government accuses that the LTTE is not allowing the people to go out of Vanni and it is true to a certain extent. Only those injured, sick, or elderly are permitted to go out of Vanni by the LTTE. But about 40,000 people have found their way into areas controlled by the Government. But these people are compelled to stay inside the 'Welfare Centers' or 'Open Prisons'. The names vary depending on which side of the divide one is. Freedom of Movement is severely curtailed in these centers.

The UN agencies and others, who advocate the evacuation of people from Vanni based on the principle of Freedom of Movement of the people, do not raise their voices against the severe curtailment of the freedom of movement of the people sheltered in these centers. We find it difficult to comprehend such double standards.

Further, the people have got their right to stay in their own places even in times of war which is guaranteed by the International Conventions on waging war. But no International Agency such as the UN or others has showed their opposition to herd like chasing of the people away from their homes and villages by the parties to the conflict.

## 6. FOOD CRISIS

The availability of the staple food, rice, is fast approaching extinction. Even the rice that is available costs RS.180/=Wheat flour and milk powder have become scarce in the shops. Vegetables and fruits are not available at all. Nutritious food for children and pregnant and lactating mothers, the sick and the elderly is not available. Soya meet has almost become extinct. Even what is rarely available costs RS. 3500/= per Kilo. Dried Chilies and tamarind have almost disappeared. Dried chilies cost RS. 4000/= and Tamarind costs Rs.600/=. A kilo of fish costs more than Rs.1000/=. Fuel has not been sent to Vanni for a long time.

In short, there is a very severe shortage of essential food items. The prices of the available items have sky rocketed while the purchasing power of the people have reached the rock bottom. Food is brought by the ships. Smaller ships bring about 10—20 MT of food. A bigger ship brought 500 MT of food on 07.03.2009. Off loading and distribution of the food items are carried out amidst great difficulties.

We can see the multiplication of the roadside shops. Mostly abandoned goods are sold here. One finds vehicle spare parts, clothes, cosmetic items, salt, spices etc—all unrelated items, sold at these ad-hoc, and open air shops. The hard earned savings of the people have melted during multiple displacements and they depend on the dry rations issued to them for survival. But the quantity of food items brought by the ships is totally insufficient to be distributed among the

displaced people. Further due to non availability of proper storage facilities, attempts are made to distribute the food as soon as the food is unloaded from the ships and boats. It is a very difficult and dedicated operation by the local Government officials and helpers and ICRC and UN officials, as it is raining very heavily in Vanni now since 08.03.2009.

## **7. Health crisis.**

Life in an uninhabitable stretch of coastal belt, congested living under worn out tarpaulin sheets, depleted water resources, non availability of toilet facilities, sewage system and garbage systems, non availability of nutritious food, pollution caused by the explosions of shells and bombs, particularly the chemicals seeping into the water resources and contaminating them, destruction of flora, the scorching sun, and the biting cold interspersed with heavy rains all add to the woes and tragedy of these people, who also are facing a cruel war for the last two years.

Deaths and injuries, starvation and illnesses continue to assault the people amidst a severe shortage of medicines, medical staff and infrastructural facilities. Constant exposure to incessant explosions leave the people, particularly the children, pregnant and lactating mothers, heart patients, and the elders severely traumatized.

However, the tireless and dedicated services of the available Doctors and the staff are praise worthy. It is really consoling that the wounded and those seriously ill are transported by ships for further treatment to Trincomalee by ICRC amidst great difficulties

Medicines which are allowed to be brought by ships are totally insufficient to cater the rising medical needs of the people. Antibiotic drugs and syrups, vaccines, IV fluids, analgesics, surgical items, cotton, gauze, Jeevani etc are in acute shortage and this needs to be remedied very urgently to save the lives of the people.

## **10. Ecological Impact:**

In an area where about 5000 people inhabited, the whole population of Vanni inhabits now. Bunkers, tarpaulins, wells, and toilets are now put up in this order generally. In order to put up bunkers, thousands of palmyrah and coconut trees have been cut. Other trees are being cut for fire wood by the hundreds of thousands of people who are deprived of fuel or cookers. An area that had a canopy of these trees has become barren now. A dry zone deprived of its greenery will have to face disastrous consequences in the future.

Besides, tens of thousands of shells which explode day after day and the hundreds of bombs which are dropped from the planes destroys the landscape and its fertility. The smoke and fumes emanated lead to pollution of the atmosphere and health hazards. Chemicals of these shells and bombs seeping into the soil pollute the water resources as well. With heavy rain water now seeping deep into the soil, one can easily imagine the health disaster that is going to take place in the near and distant future.

## **Conclusion:**

The Safe Area declared by the Government is a Unilateral one. The other party to the conflict has not endorsed this and is therefore not committed to it. Further, there is no International

Body to monitor it. Because of these reasons much innocent blood has been shed and thousands of innocent civilians have been brutally killed and maimed for life in the Safe Area itself. Such Unilateral declarations of Safety Areas, beginning from Visvamadu-Oddusuddan, to the present one seem to be a military strategy rather than aimed at saving the people. Such exercises become futile and dangerous without a commitment elicited from the LTTE too. If done so, then the Safe Areas will serve their purposes.

Based on the issues mentioned above in our report, we propose the following proposals definitively and decisively. We believe that there is no other way to arrest the great human tragedy that has exploded in Vanni. Further, we believe that what we propose below is the barest minimum solution that would grind to a halt this ongoing and slow but steady Genocide. Based on the Conventions of the UN on Refugees and their inalienable rights for the protection and well being, we put forward these proposals before the world community, in the name of the exalted values of Human Dignity, Democracy and Plurality and on behalf of the people of Vanni who deeply feel let down and trapped and who are in agony :

1. Transform the present Safe Area into Zone of Security with a BILATERAL AGREEMENT by the parties to the conflict assuring accountability and monitored by an International Body
- 2 Establish a well equipped hospital managed and maintained by an International Body.
- 3 In order to facilitate the above mentioned in a conducive political atmosphere, establish a CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES.

Kindly do the needful and use your good influences on the parties concerned in order to realize a true and effective Safe Area. We make this ardent appeal in trust and hope that the World Community will prevent the bunkers of these helpless people from becoming their own burial grounds!!!

**FOR OBVIOUS REASONS THE IDENTITY OF THE AUTHOR IS NOT REVEALED.**