

Protracted life of Srilankan refugees

South Asia is home to 2 million refugees¹. It has seen some of the largest refugee flows in history and several countries here have a record of being hosts to large refugee populations over prolonged periods. A geographical area with simmering conflicts, widespread poverty and frequent disasters, it is also home to millions of internally displaced people – even their number largely unknown to governments. None of the South Asian countries are signatories of the UN Convention or Protocol on refugees, there are also no regional or national mechanisms to address refugee and displacement issues.

A constantly changing globalised world with its political dynamics, economic and development changes and sharp inequalities make it imperative to focus on the rights of people who are forced to flee from their home. From a human rights, development and good governance perspective it is impossible to ignore causes and consequences of forced migration in this region. For, such huge movements of people have caused conflicts and emergency situations in all countries in this region.

Srilankan refugees in India

The civil war in Srilanka has ejected has constantly ejected refugees into India since 1983 riots. From 1987 the refugees returned home with the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) only to return in 1990 along with the IPKF. In 1991 the LTTE assassinated the former Indian Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi during an election campaign. As a result, the government of Tamilnadu banned education for the Srilankan refugees, imposed a naval blockade on the new arrivals. From 1992-95 repatriation of Srilankan refugees in spite of a high scale war in Jaffna went on. After the ban on LTTE India has always been very suspicious of the Srilankan Tamil refugees. At present the government of Tamilnadu runs 118 refugee camps in 24 districts catering to about 70,000 refugees and many more new arrivals expected as the civil war has entered a new phase.

Life in the camps

The Srilankan refugee camps have been in existence for the past 16 years. Apart from confinement, lack of privacy and dependent on the host government's policies have had its toll on the Srilankan refugees who are always at risk of being exploited by different forces. A bleak future stares at them as nothing is permanent. **Lack of TIME and SPACE** at their disposal as others determine these and make life hard for them as their culture and traditions are eroded. The new generations born in the camps are ever ready to pick up an alien

¹ UNHCR annual report 2005

culture with a strong influence of the materialistic Tamil film world. Unemployment pushes them towards anti-social activities.

Lack of space and unhygienic living conditions in camps

The living space in the refugee camps is very small. In the godown camps 8' by 8' partitions are allocated per family with plastic sheets as partitions. In the dam camps the refugees have used the temporary hutment constructed during the building of dams. A number of camps have been turned into slums. A number of cyclone relief shelters have been turned into permanent shelters for the refugees, which are unsuitable for long stays, under these conditions the refugees are staying for the last 16 years.

Harassment by officials

The government officials who are totally in command distribution of relief harass the refugees. The Q branch police further add insult to injury by unnecessarily harassing the innocents and implicating them with militant and criminal activities.

Widows

The war in Srilanka has created plenty of young widows. Many young widows are forced to earn their living by some means or other. It can lead to they being misused by men and they will be exposed to various anti social activities of the society.

Early marriages

In the camps in India, the boys and girls do not have much of privacy. Most of the time they have to stay together in a storm shelter with just a cloth separating the different families. They hardly have 100 square feet per family, irrespective of the size of the family. Once again the boys and girls are not gainfully employed during the day as they are not allowed to move out of the camps. Relationships bloom into love leading to marriages. Early marriages result in problems, which are physical, social and psychological in nature.

Young girls and boys are not prepared to take up family responsibilities. They do not have a steady income to fall back upon. Emotionally, they are ill equipped to handle conflicts that will arise in relationships. Physically they are not mature. When the girl needs guidance for her own growth from the parents, she becomes a mother and she will not be able to cope with the tensions and problems of looking after a child of her own. Hence some of these marriages break up early. Many stay married in spite of incompatibilities because of the compulsions of the society. But life becomes a burden for both.

Confined camp conditions

Social scientists find refugees disoriented beings. The refugee mind is in constant confusion. His life is determined by officials of an alien land. His “house” is restricted, his movement monitored and his food rationed. He is an object under the gaze of officials and charity groups, denied even a modicum of privacy. Life is oppressively monotonous. This disintegration of his sense of self is an aspect rarely considered. On top of this he lives in the midst of a hostile environment where local politicians have made the Sri Lankan Tamils a scapegoat for all ills².

Special camps– which in practice are jails

The Chengalpattu special camp in Tamilnadu, is in practice a jail. There were three special camps earlier. There are more than 140 inmates who are suspected to have links with militants. A number of innocents too have been sent here without valid reasons and proof³. Though these refugees are registered as refugees on entry into India they have been incarcerated for no crime against the Indian government. A PUCL (People’s Union for Civil Liberties) report claims that these refugees live in sub human condition under close confinement with lack of medical facilities.

Restriction of movement

The Sri Lankan refugees are denied their refugees to move, which is enjoyed by other refugees. This hampers the meaningful existence of the refugees, as they are confined to the camps having an impending psychological effect. Though other refugees enjoy this right the government says the restriction is based on security fear though there are 45,000 Srilankan Refugees living outside the camps.

The Naval Blockade of the Srilankan Refugees

The Indian Navy and the coast guards ably resisted such a move when the authorities concerned issued an order to shoot at boats carrying refugees. A number of refugees arriving from Mannar took a bold step forward to reach India at any cost but the boatmen feared taking a risk and dropped them in one of the 13 islets in the Adams Bridge separating India and Srilanka. These islets are small barren sand dunes, which disappear when the water level increases. Scores of families were stranded there in the International Border Line were lost for a few lives including that of a three and a half year old child. The local fishermen raped a newly married girl. Indian fishermen who are traditionally very friendly to the refugees were instructed never to go to the rescue of any refugees stranded in the sand dunes. Officials in the Mandapam transit camp

² Amalraj Chinnappan – Refugees – Victims of the Global Disorder Integral Liberation Vol.4, No.2, June 2000

³ People's Union for Civil Liberties, Tamilnadu report on Special Camps, 2000.

ordered the new arrivals to call back their relatives in Srilanka and tell them that they were un-welcome in India.

Ban on NGOs

The Indian government has stopped the entry of NGOs from working among the camp refugees. The NGOs are denied access to provide relief and rehabilitation to the refugees. This leaves a large gap in refugee protection as their Rights are denied to them and they are secluded from the rest of the world. As India fear foreign interference in the form of NGO assistance its power to control the refugee will be drastically cut and India's role in refugee assistance may be questioned.

Non-acceptance of new families

If a couple from two different camps get married and wish to set, up an independent family of their own, they are denied this right for 'security reasons'. They are denied their dole and ration and at times sent out of the camp and are not recognized as refugee anymore.

Camp shifting

The officials frequently shift the refugees from one camp to the other suiting their convenience thus denying the refugee to settle in a particular place and seek an employment. The obvious reason given is 'security'. This also hampers the education of the children and causes a deep psychological scar on their young minds, as the government exercises its control over them. Time and again they are made aware that they are refugees.

Srilankan Tamils living outside camps not recognized as refugees

Those living outside the camps and arriving in India by flight are not recognized as refugees. They need to extend the term of their visa frequently and have to live along with the nationals, which is an expensive affair.

Lack of respect to refugees who are looked upon as criminals

After the killing of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi the refugees have been looked down upon as criminals. For the crimes committed by a few the whole refugee community is held responsible and looked down upon. Intellectuals too have contributed a great deal towards this. They have acted as prophets of hatred. Prof. Suriyanarayan Retd. Director, Centre for South Asian Studies Chennai points in his book "Between Fear & Hope" that half a dozen of the accused in the Rajiv Gandhi murder case were registered as refugees, but independent researches show none of the accused were from any refugee camps. The media too has played a negative role in portraying the refugees in a darker shade.

Though the Indian constitution and International law guarantees equality of law to citizens and aliens the Srilankan Tamils acquitted in the Rajiv Gandhi murder case were sent to the special camps, whereas their Indian friends were set free!

Lack of identity

Living in an alien land as non citizens has its own bearing. A refugee's only identity is the identity and ration card supplied to her/him. They are known by their card number not their names. The humiliations faced by the students in the local schools where they are seen as aliens not worthy of studying on par with the Indian students is most pitiable.

Conflict with locals

Most camps are located close to villages and towns. The refugees though not legally permitted to work find jobs outside as the vigil over the camps are relaxed. The locals allege that refugees take away their jobs. The government dole given to the refugees act as an eyesore to the locals. At times conflicts arise as a result of problems related to youth of the local and refugee community. Naturally the police take the side of the locals and the refugees are found to be at fault.

Denial of higher education

After the killing of Rajiv Gandhi, the former Indian Prime Minister in 1991, the government banned education to the Srilankan refugee students. The ban was revoked in 1996. From 2003 the government once again refused to admit Srilankan refugee students in government institutions to pursue higher education, thus depriving very many students of a rightful place in education institutions.

Radha⁴, 17 was a brilliant student from the Arani refugee camp in Tamilnadu. She had passed the 12th standard examination with a distinction scoring about 95% but the policy of the government not to admit refugees in government colleges proved too costly for her. She was frustrated of being unable to pursue her studies and fell victim to the confined camp conditions lacking privacy. She fell in love with a boy from her camp and married him. Later learning that he was addicted to alcohol and drug abuse, Radha tried hard to reform him but in vain. In April 2005, a verbal duel between the couple led her to taking away her own life by dousing in kerosene and burning herself. Stories such as this are common in the refugee camps. They go unnoticed by the media and remain undocumented by concerned authorities.

⁴ The girl's parents were met and interviewed in June 2005 by Paul Newman, Radha died in May 2005

Long camp stay

Social scientists find refugees disoriented beings. The refugee mind is in constant confusion. His life is determined by officials of an alien land. His “house” is restricted, his movement monitored and his food rationed. He is an object under the gaze of officials and charity groups, denied even a modicum of privacy. Life is oppressively monotonous⁵. This disintegration of his sense of self is an aspect rarely considered. On top of this he lives in the midst of a hostile environment where local politicians have made the Sri Lankan Tamils a scapegoat for all ills.

Unemployment

As the restriction on the refugees is imposed most of the time the young and able-bodied youth are denied access to employment opportunities. The refugees have to survive on the meagre dole doled out by the government. Whenever they get an opportunity to work they are seen as opponents in the job market by the locals leading to rifts. The youth have nothing challenging or creative to do. The only outlet they have is socialising with others, which includes persons of the other sex. This is not a taboo in the Sri Lankan society but an act of disapproval in the Indian society.

Chronic illness

Abject poverty and unhygienic living conditions help in the spread of diseases rapidly in the camps. The non-availability of medicine in the local government hospitals force refugees to go without treatment. Chronic illnesses are common and at times refugees go to the extent taking away their lives without any remedy.

Lack of privacy

As the living conditions are pathetic where at times many families have to share a common hall, toilets with partitions between houses are made of polythene sheets the refugees are forced to lead a life without privacy. A family however big it may be is allotted space of 8x8 or at the most 10 x 10. Young girls are forced to change their clothes in front of their male siblings and their father. There is every room for young men from the neighborhood to gaze at them. Students do not have space to peacefully study at home in such living conditions. Young couples lead a life where they cannot even discuss or express their feelings to one another in the presence of others.

Haunting memories of the past

The 23 year old civil war has taken its toll, the refugees are people who have braved the bombs and bullets, and the wrath of the sea to reach India. The violence and bloodshed they have witnessed in the form of arbitrary killing, disappearances, arrests, torture, aerial bombings, constant displacement, ethnic

⁵ Raper Mark, *Accompanying Refugees, Everybody's Challenge*, JRS Publications 2001

cleansing etc have left an indelible haunting memory in them. It is extremely difficult to erase such nightmarish experiences.

Elopement, teenage pregnancies

The local Tamil culture in India gives primary importance to cine stars who are seen as real life heroes. This is new to the Srilankan refugees. They are greatly influenced by the local film culture and feel they are secure and respected if they are in the company of a girl. Their educational activities are curbed after secondary schooling, they have nothing meaningful to do hence they feel they are ready to lead a family life and prevailing camp conditions help them in easily getting the attraction of the opposite sex. As parents oppose these marriages elopement and teenage pregnancies are common.

Trafficking, alcohol and drug abuse

It is a well-known fact that women get employed easily in the Middle East or the West. An entry into these countries is a sure passport for the economic liberation of the entire family. There are trafficking networks that operate in sending these women abroad for employment. Women spend all their saving, at times borrow money and pay these traffickers who send them to Colombo and then to other countries. Many times these women land up in brothels and become victims of lustful men who exploit their innocence. At times they are brutally tortured when they are employed as house maids⁶.

Men who are idle depending on their wives have extra-marital affairs, they often spend their time in enjoying the goodness of alcohol and drugs. It is also fashionable for the idle minded youth to test these tools of pleasure.

Protracted conflict at country of origin

The 23 years of conflict has shown no respite except for a brief a four year cease-fire which ended in 2005. People who are living in the camps from 1990 onwards are dejected at the situation and feel that they have completely lost hopes of peace and to return home. As patriotic citizens of a country at war they see not hope towards the return of peace.

Separation from family members

Living life as a refugee has taken its toll as these people cannot think of a reunion with their relatives and the state of affairs at the country of origin has left them in lurch. The emotional need to be with their family members agonize them from within.

⁶ Amalraj.C, Maid running madness, South Asian Refugee Information, 1998

Conditions of poverty and money lending racquet

The low standards of living and life has reduced the refugees to a lead a life of poverty, especially the old, disabled, widows' etc. As there are frequent emergency needs, these people are forced to borrow money from the moneylenders who charge a very high rate of interest. To repay this they again fall into the trap of a different moneylender and the cycle continues. All their earning is spent only in paying the interest which is astronomical and helps in further pushing the refugees who have fallen into the trap of money lenders to reach the lowest levels of poverty.

Question mark over their future

Any pregnant woman in a refugee camp is scared to become a mother, as the future of the unborn child is bleak. Nobody knows how the child would grow in such unfriendly atmosphere without an identity of its own and live a life of hardship in an alien land. How the child would grow, who would take care of its future, can the parents fulfill the duties of being a parent and many more similar questions haunt them.

What the Srilankan refugee community has lost during and after the war

The Socio /Economic Impact⁷

- Broken Families
- Trafficking of Women
- Disruption of education for children
- Teenage Marriages
- Young Widows
- Women Warriors
- Child Soldiers
- Eroding job Opportunities
- Agricultural Land turned in to Mine Fields
- Destruction of Property
- Constant Displacement
- Loss of 65,000 Lives
- 17,000 Disappearances

- 330,000 refugee, 650,000 IDPs
- Breakdown of all economic activities
- Loss of Families and Moral values
- Denial of basic Human rights
- Promotion of hatred
- Emergence of war as a new culture
- Introduction of violence (Baptism by fire)

The psychological pressure undergone have resulted in the following⁸: -

- Boredom
- Immunization of sufferings leading to lack of reaction
- Losing emotions
- Mental illness
- Losing interest in self and family finally leading to suicide and suicide itself,
- Tendencies of irresponsibility / careless attitude towards life,
- Vulnerability to anti-social activities to release mental stress,
- The guilt feeling of not being able to earn and look after the family,
- Constant fear of getting killed/harassed,
- Children developing imaginary visions of being attacked and harmed by armed group leading to loss of sleep and a buzzing noise in the ears.
- Difficulty in delivery,
- Expectant mothers/young mothers undergo stress because they cannot give a good living condition/environment to the children,
- Children are curbed from their natural growth (e.g. playing, good food and health), which makes them indifferent.

Conclusion

The Srilankan refugees are a community who does not receive any organised/formalised psychosocial support from the Indian State or other

⁷ compilation and observation of impact of war on refugees by Paul Newman from interaction with refugees

⁸ Paul Newman, Internal Flight Options in Srilanka, JRS document, 1999

agencies. As people who are forcibly displaced by conflict they are the most vulnerable community as there are no refugee laws to protect them in India. There is a great scope for intervention by like-minded groups to help them come out of their fears by effective psychosocial programmes. These would go a long way in minimizing their miseries and help them forget their dreadful past.

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A diary of camp visit to Gopalapuram Srilanka refugee Camp, 30/04/06 .

This camp is located at about 15 kilometers in the outskirts of Thirunelveli (Nellai) district of South Tamilnadu, India. There are 182 families living here with a total population of 624 people among them there are

	Males	Females
Adults	251	255
Children	61	57
Unregistered	17	34

It is one of the better Camps as the refugees are at peace without much harassment from the 'Q' branch police or the camp authorities. Firewood is available in plenty, if girls find job they earn each Rs.50/. day and men earn Rs. 100/ as load men in quarries. The refugees also get employment opportunities in the nearby estates and at times the youngster come to Thirunelveli town if they get opportunities to work. There is complete religious harmony in the camp where there is a well-built church as well as a temple. The various camp association too function smoothly. The oneness among the refugees can be felt gauging their high turnout for various association meetings as well as for social service activities and family functions.

Women's self help group "Udayanila"

This is a newly started group with 18 members, started just three months ago. They call their group as 'Udayanila or full moon, as the group would like every women in the camp to grow to her fullest potential and shine in the sky. They charge a membership fee of Rs.1/. The main activity of the group is to manufacture nutritious food for women and children. There is a great demand for this and within three months the group has made a savings of Rs. 2,900/. The self started group began with a modest contribution of Rs 15/- per member every week. They have never looked back and are striving hard to improve and expand their sphere of activities. They meet every Sunday and discuss various women related issues as well as business. There are plans to sell soap in the camp at a cheaper cost. The group would directly buy soap from the manufacturers for Rs. 170/- for 80 soaps and sell it for Rs 200/- making a profit of Rs 30/ on 80 soaps .

Youth Association

The camp also houses a youth association with 35 members. The young men mostly spend their weekends playing volleyball, football, cricket etc. They also take part in tournaments conducted outside. They take up the camp cleaning activities and clearing the nearby bushes, maintenance of the sanitary and the water connections. The youth association also lends its helping hand when there are public functions or even weddings and other private function in the camp. They take up the responsibility of constructing the temporary thatched hall covered on all sides. Though most of them seek employment as load men, cleaners, driver finding jobs is difficult, yet unlike other peers these young men use their time for more constructive purposes.

A YOUNG COMMUNITY LEADER

Jesurani is 31 years old married for the past five months. Her husband is from Trincomallee, recently his relatives were killed in the aerial bombings by the Srilankan forces. She hails from Vankallai in the Mannar district of Sri Lanka. She came as refugee to India in 1990 as a young 16 year old girl. She was repatriated in 1992 as part of the UNHCR sponsored repatriation of Srilankan refugees. As the war resumed she returned to India in 1995 as the Srilankan forces for non-possession of identity card harassed her. On return to India she had a tormenting experience of being stranded in the sea for two days as the Srilankan navy attacked their boat and the boatmen escaped leaving those on board to fend themselves. This two day trauma bring tears on to her eyes and the memory haunts her even to this day. From her boat she saw another boat being capsized. All those on board had to starve for two days and were lucky to reach an islet from where they were rescued by the Indian Navy.

“Why should I go back to a land where I’m treated like an unwanted person. I cannot travel within my own country for being a Tamil. We need to prove our identity that we are not militants 35 times if we need to travel from Batticaloa to Colombo in the check points, and every time we need to face the harassment of being physically checked. If I have a scratch mark I would be arrested of being a militant. All this to move within one’s own country. Why would one like to go back when you treated like this” she asks.

She is happy living in India in spite of all the hardships she faces. She becomes prophetic when she says

“ We live only once, so live as long as possible, death is unwanted and unwelcome. Life is hard but it is precious, violence is unnatural, more so violence in Srilanka is contagious without an end. What to do in Srilanka without an end to the conflict?”. This young lady is the leader of the women’s self help group in the Gopalamudram camp. She is not an isolated voice, she conveys the frustrations of the entire refugee community on the violence they have witnessed and the search for peace they all thirst for after leading the lives of refugees in unwelcome conditions in the refugee camps in India.

HARD WORK HAS NO SUBSTITUE

Vellathai is 48 years old, she hails from Abudulam Kalm in Mannal. She is the mother of 2 boys and 3 girls. She reached India in 1990 after IPKf (Indian Peace Keeping Force) returned and the civil war restarted. In 1995 during the a short cease-fire between me Srilankan government and the LTTE, her husband returned home with a son. Since then she has lived alone with three daughter and a son. Everyday is a struggle for her to keep the stomachs filled. She works in a near by quarry as a stone cutter considered to be a man's job for a paltry sum of Rs.50/- a little more than \$1. In her own words Vellathai sums up her life in India as " Struggle for food is part of her life, only if we work hard we can earn and then eat. The only good things in India is we do not listen to me booming sounds of aerial bombings and shelling, nor do we run into jungles for hiding. Even through we drink water most of the time to fill our stomachs we are happy here. No day passes without remembering our homeland, our near and dear ones. Our children have grown up in this land, responsibilities too have grown it is difficult to leave everything here and return home". Vellathai recently got one of her daughters married, her 20 year old son supports her as he works as a loadman, yet their dreamland is a peaceful Srilanka where the entire family wants to be reunited with their father.

A painful loss

Kurunathan is 57, but looks much older, a carpenter by profession, he hails from Uyilankulam in Mannar district. He is the father of 2 sons and 2 daughters. When the family had to decide about seeking refuge in India, his wife refused to join him to reach India. She stayed with her mother, a son too stayed with him. Kurunathan along with the 2 daughters and a son reached India in 1990. He gets to work for about 4 to 5 days in a month earning Rs:150/- a day. With his meager income he managed to get his daughter married, his son-in-law is a driver. His son is a three-wheel taxi driver. Recently Kurunathan lost his wife but his helpless condition as a refugee prevented him from paying his last respects to his wife. He also lost his other daughter who had a hole in her heart. He has also not met nor is he in touch with his other son in Srilanka. Being a

refugee has surely saved his life but has taken its toll on his personal life. He misses his wife and son very dearly but he is helpless, as he is a refugee.

A Prodigal Son

Godwyn, is the camp leader of Gopalasamudram, he is young, only 31, hails from Panankattikotu in Mannar town. As a young boy he reached India in 1990 after a fearsome boat journey across the gulf of Mannar. During the journey he saw a boat being capsized and another sinking after a shell hit it. Godwyn sought refuge in India along with his mother and 3 brothers and 2 sisters. On reaching India, Godwyn joined school and was doing well but the dastardly killing of Rajiv Gandhi abruptly ended God Godwyn's dreams along with the dreams of youngsters like him as the government of Tamilnadu banned education for Srilanka refugees as a backlash of Rajiv's killing.

Disturbed by the turn of events, Godwyn, heart broken now had nothing to do. He was infatuated and fell in love with Shantini. Her parents objected to this relationship but Godwyn then, only 18 eloped with Shanthini who was then 16. He attributes this to the free society and lack of formation along with closed camp conditions to his teenage waywardness.

The course of life changed for him permanently. He was only 21 when a son was born and Godwyn had additional responsibilities. The new hardship made him a tough man. Godwyn has set up a small petty shop at the camp. His meager earnings are just enough to make both the ends meet. He had sent his wife to Saudi Arabia for two years. Her savings helped her to set up a shop for Godwyn. As they could not live apart his wife Shanthini returned to India.

Today being the camp leader, he takes his own case as an example to tell the youth of the camp how one's life can be shattered in a teenage marriage. His experience and presence among the youth has been very productive in making the camp a very proactive and productive one. His mother stays with him; he has also helped his younger brother to complete graduation in commerce. He has registered himself with UNHCR to seek repatriation, which has been stopped since last year. He is also continues of returning empty handed as he holds no land or property in his homeland.

He wants to carry all that he and his wife have earned. He also would like to see his soon completing education in a peaceful state. He sums up by saying “I had to be school dropout at IX std but I want my son to study well, education is the only gift we parents can impart on our children, it is a blessing that JRS helps us realising this dream into a reality”.

FRANCIS AMAL-A YOUTH ICON IN THE CAMP

He is 29, hails from Adampan in Mannar district. He is the darling of the camp. He is hailed as a role model for his kindness, discipline, commitment, helping attitude and more so for being a good human being. With all these good qualities bestowed on him Francis is a young man who is maimed. Francis reached India in 1990 along with his mother, a relative and 2 sisters. Having lost his father when he was very young, Francis had to end his schooling after 8th standard and take up the burden of rearing the family. He got his elder sister married and educated his younger sister. His ailing mother died in 2004 and the young shoulders of Francis had to bear the burden of becoming the head of the family.

Francis, who was working as a loadman learnt driving trucks and later found a better job as a truck driver. On the 2nd of April 2005, Francis, driving a truck, was crossing an unmanned rail –road level crossing. To his bad luck the truck broke down with a minor engine problem exactly at the middle of the rail track. Francis tried his best to set things right. Soon the truck crew saw a fast approaching train and escaped for safety. Francis realizing the gravity of the situation felt that if the truck was abandoned there would a great disaster as the passenger train would suffer more damages and the train passengers were vulnerable of meeting a major accident.

Francis unmindful of the approaching train was able to repair the minor engine problem in his truck and started his truck. He was able to move only a couple of yards in front. The train headed straight into the rear part of the truck. Francis who averted a major

accident suffered multiple facial and head injuries. He also suffered a nervous breakdown, his left side is paralysed. He cannot walk without support. He is also unable to talk properly. He was in hospital for 5 months. Though he is praised by everyone in the camp for his bravery, Francis did not receive any compensation though he has spent Rs 350,000. The family had to sell all their property in Srilanka. The truck company paid only Rs 15000/-. The railway police is looking to arrest him, but his pitiable condition has prevented them from arresting him. Francis could have got a compensation of Rs 400,000/- from the insurance company but the truck company which had employed him refused to give him a certificate of employment as they would have lost the insurance on the truck and could have been fined in the court.

In his most turbulent times he remembers the financial help rendered by JRS and the personal touch and care taken by Sr. Pauline, the JRS Programme officer. She was also able to get money from many other sources. The entire family is grateful to Mr. Ravindran, the JRS coordinator who took personal interest in Francis and helped him to move out of the bed. The entire family is indebted to JRS for standing by the family during the hours of crisis "JRS continues to help Francis", says Ravindran. Joackim pillai, the brother-in-law of Francis says "He was the only earning member of the family. Now the family has to depend on the meagre dole and also look out for managing the medicinal expenses". Joackim was forced to quit his job as a cook as some one has to attend to Francis round the clock.

Though Francis is yet to recover fully, he has the spirit and the goodwill of all those who know him to pray for his complete recovery after which if peace prevails in Srilanka, the family hopes to return home.

Losing arm for lending money

Santhiapillai Jebamalai was a farmer in Pirapakandal in Mannar, Srilanka, the civil has ejected him to India as a refugee. His younger brother was in the LTTE and died in a battle. Suspecting Jebamalai's involvement in the LTTE, the IPKF arrested him and

tortured him, later after proving his innocence he came out of the prison. He immediately came to India and ever since he has been living here alone. He was all set to get married in 2002 to a girl living in London. Jebamalalai had given Rs500/- as a loan to a youth, when he asked the youth to return the money as he was leaving for London, the young man is an inebriated condition after consuming drugs cut the arm of Jebamalalai with a deadly weapon and grievously injured him. His wedding was cancelled.

Jebamalalai had nobody to take care of him. It was the JRS Coordinator who took complete care of him and JRS footed all the medical expenses incurred by Jebamalalai. Today Jebamalalai cannot work and wants to return home but has no money to pay the illegal boatmen. He is now completely dependent on the government dole for his day to day food. He is thankful to JRS for saving his life and supporting him in his most difficult times.

Living with Hope of recovery

Chandra kumar is a 23 year old young man living in the Gopalapuram Srilankan refugee camp. He took refuge in India from his native village of Vidathaltheevu in Mannar district in 1990. In 1991 when he was in the 3rd standard he was affected by brain fever, which forced him to quit school, as he was unable to walk. He slowly developed deficiency in his leg bones and lost complete power to even stand. After the brain fever attack he lost strength and fell on a burning stove suffering burn injuries on his back. Chandrakumar lives with his grandparents, his parents are in Sri Lanka. Aasiyan his grandfather says "Only god can help", his grandmother Thaivanai says the disease cannot be cured in Sri Lanka.

The treatment is very expensive, these old couples have no source of income, their only support comes from JRS, and with fold folded hands they acknowledge the love and care showered on their grandson by the JRS volunteers. In 2004 a thorn poled Chandrakumar's left-foot, the injury aggravated and ultimately his leg had to be

amputated till his knee. JRS has promised him help to fix an artificial limb and take him to a specialized bone care unit to treat his disease.

Friends of his age group frequently visit Chandrakumar, he loves meeting them and spending time with them, he feels sad that he cannot venture out, as he cannot even stand. The only solace for him is the promise made to him and his face brighten when says, " Ravi annan (brother), the JRS coordinator is taking me for special treatment". Hope his dream of walking comes true.

MANDAPAM VISIT 01/05/06

The Mandapam transit camp can house about 12,000 refugees at time. This camp has been in operation since the mid 19th century when the British used to but indentured labourers from South India to work as Tea estate workers after clearing the snake infested jungles in Srilanka. After independence the camp was used for repatriation of the tea estate workers who were returning to India till the beginning of the civil war in Srilanka in 1983. Since then Tamil refugees landing on the seashores of India from all parts of Srilanka are brought here and Mandapam camp has become a transit camp. It is from here that refugees are supplied to all the other camps around Tamilnadu.

Even during the repatriations in 1987 to 1990 and then from 1992- 1995 Mandapam was filled with refugees. The camp had almost become empty after the cease-fire agreement in 2002 as many refugees returned by illegal boats and by air. Since December 2005 there has been a trickle of refugees as the cease-fire is violated by the warring groups rendering people homeless, with no security to their lives and property. There are about 700 new arrivals in the camp. About 70% of them are from Trincomallee district in the Eastern parts of Srilanka. The camp is also known for its dreaded 'Quarantine', where all new arrivals are kept in a single hall with a single toilet and a bulb glowing 24 hours. It is here that the questioning of the refugees by different Indian security agencies take place. Only after establishing their credibility of bearing good qualities, antecedents and not having any links with militants especially the LTTE, the refugees are released into

the transit camp after spending 15 days in the quarantine. It is from here that they are distributed to the other camps across Tamilnadu. At present there are 103 camps, of which two are special camps which house militants and are closed. Mandapam transit camp too is a high security camp where no Indians are allowed to enter except for the JRS Camp Pastor who stays in the camp at the service of the refugees.

A painful journey to freedom:

Nirmala, originally hailing from Jaffna, along with her family had moved to Mullaitheevu in 1996, where they lost everything in the tsunami. Nirmala, her husband and their six children then moved to Pesalai in Mannar, where Nirmala was employed by the Parish Priest of Pesalai Fr. Vincent Patrick OMI, he also helped Karthikesan to set up a small saree and fish selling business.

On 23rd December 2005, a claymore mine blast aimed at a bus carrying navy personnel killed about 15 naval men. This retaliation killing at Pesalai turned this fishing hamlet into a bloody torture ground. The uniformed men went on a rampage. They immediately arrested men who were close to the place of the incident. Among those arrested was Nirmala Rose Mary's husband Karthikesan, 34.

Immediately after the incident the navy raided all the houses and started beating up everyone who protested. A terrified Nirmala was an eye witness to the rape of her neighbour by a few Navy men. She saw the young girl's upper garment being ripped open and after raping her the rapists stamped her chest abusing her for being a Tamil. Then the hut was torched. Civilian property was looted. Pesalai was in flames. The whole village was lined up on the main street from morning in the scorching sun till evening. The people were let to go only in the evening only after the repeated pleas of the Parish Priest and the intervention of the Bishop.

Helpless Nirmala was taken for questioning as her husband was in custody. Nirmala who knows Sinhalese spoke to the naval officer of the innocence of her family. The sympathetic officer convinced of her explanation released her. Karthikesan was still undergoing torture in custody, his entire body bears cigarette burnt marks. He also witnessed four fishermen, who were suspects, piled with tyres from foot to neck being burnt alive in the naval torture camp. Once again the Bishop of Mannar intervened and got Karthikesan released from the naval prison. The family could no longer live in Pesalai as the worst days of their lives kept haunting them. They decided to seek refuge in India till peace returned to the island nation.

A new ordeal begins:

The boatmen at Pesalai agreed to drop the family in India charging Rs.5000/- for adults and Rs:2,500/- for children. The family sold all the jewellery they had and also all the household goods. In the evening 42 people were loaded on to the single engine fishing boat with 4 boatmen. Midway in the sea the boatmen forced Nirmala for sexual favours and also threatened all the refugees to part with their gold. Suddenly the boat unable to bear the heavy weight from inside started sinking. The Srilankan navy caught the other boat, which was going ahead of them. The naval men who saw this boat sinking kept away from it. There were loud cries for help. Water had gushed inside the boat and Nirmala had to wrap and lift her 1 ½ year old child above her head. The young children were neck deep in water. Everybody was vomiting and thought their end had arrived. Nirmala started praying to Mother Mary, miraculously an Indian fishing boat appeared and rescued all the refugees. They touched the Indian shores empty handed as they had thrown all their belongings into the sea.

On reaching India at 4.am the local fishermen gave them food and drinking water. Early in the morning Sr. Lilly and Sr. Arul Philo from JRS arrived with breakfast and medicine to welcome these refugees. A pair of cloths was provided to all and immediately they were shifted to the quarantine for questioning in the Mandapam transit camp. After a 15-day questioning they were all allowed to live in the Mandapam transit camp. Nirmala says that they were all physically checked for bearing marks on

their body. Many wings of intelligence services questioned them and only if they are satisfied with the antecedents of the refugees, they are released into the camp. Sometimes young people are lodged for 45 days.

Janani 10, Nirmala's eldest daughter is now admitted in 3^d standard through she was studying in 4th standard in Srilanka, as it is the Indian policy to degrade a student by a year. She bears a terrified look as she had witnessed the torturing of her dad. She had even caught hold of the legs of the soldiers who were torturing her dad and had pleaded with them to spare her dad. She says the experience of seeing her dad beaten up not only bought tears but also the fear made her to urinate.

Sanjeevan 13, the eldest son feels the family should return home as they are subjected to a life of poverty. He is averse to the bad camp conditions. The other children Nisanthan 7, Ajanthan and Durga 4 (twins) are too young to speak up. Madhusan 1 ½ was thought to be dead during the boat journey, luckily he survived and is the pet of his mother.

Nirmala is extremely thankful to JRS for providing her with emergency relief and taking care of the educational needs of her children. She is in no mood to return home as she feels education of her kids would be hampered as the civil war is seeing no end. At present she is happy to be alive in India and she says "let the bad memories of Srilanka erase, then I shall think of my motherland".

Risking life for humanitarian work

Kalarathnam is 30 from Thirukadalur in Trincomalee. He worked as a coordinator for a NGO known as Youth Development Aatham (house) involved in rehabilitation of tsunami and war victims, construction of houses, water tanks, sanitation, Income Generation Programmes, health care etc. As a coordinator he had to travel extensively on both sides of the border (cleared areas are under the control of the state forces and

uncleared areas under the control of the LTTE) . He has been into this work for the past eight years.

"In the recent months things have changed in Trincomallee for the worse, the town comes under the curfew after 12.00 noon. Checkpoints have increased, the number of militants groups operating in the area too have increased, everybody is suspected of involvement with some militant group or the other. The fear of claymore mines and blasts are an on going danger any humanitarian worker has to consent. Armed men threaten peace loving innocent people at night. If they refuse to pay them, they are kidnapped and later if the groups are unable to collect a ransom from the family of the kidnapped person, the person is killed", says Kalarathnam.

On a dreadful night in January armed men barged into his house and threatened to kill him if he continued with his present job. Later some armed men destroyed computers, motorcycles and other office property belonging to his organisation. The government failed to protect them. This prompted him to seek refuge in India along with his family, as there was no safety for his family. On the 27th of January 2006 he along with his wife and two-year-old daughter reached India after travelling to Pesalai (Srilanka) by road. They paid Rs.7,000/- per head. His mother and brother too joined him. The travel to India was an ordeal to the family as the engine of the boat broke down and after repair they reached the shores of Arichalmunai in India at 20.30 hrs.

The whole family was so tired that that they could not move anywhere in the darkness. They all slept by the seashore and were moved to Mandapam transit camp. Another ordeal began here as they were kept in a 'quarantine' (a detention centre for new arrivals) for 15 days along with 40 other refugees. Like watching animal behavior the policemen closely watched them and everyday they were questioned on their motive to seek refuge. A series of questions like, which boat did you come?, who brought you here? Any relatives here, Were you in India earlier?, What is your connection with LTTE? What is your profession? Name of the boatmen who dropped you? Why did you come here? , Are a few common questions asked.

Though Kalarathnam is educated, he cannot work as the closed camp condition prevents him from venturing outside. Yet he is happy to be alive and safe though jobless.

Mary Gracy, a travelling teacher

Mary Gracy is a 33 year old teacher hailing from Uyilankulam, Mannar. This mother of two came to India as a refugee in 1990. Till 2004 she lived in the Salem refugee camp with Suman, her 5-year-old son and daughter Sugritha, 12 a 8th standard student. In 2004 she went to Mannar by illegal boat to leave her son with her parents as it was difficult to take care of him. She returned to India, but unable to live without her son, she again took an illegal boat and reached Srilanka in 2005. The whole family wanted to return to Srilanka but the escalation of violence prevented them from taking this decision. On 18/05/2005 she was returning to India along with her son. The boat in which she was travelling first came to the island of Katchaitheevu, where everybody landed and were awaiting another boat to drop them in India.

A Srilankan naval boat arrived at the island. The refugees hid in the nearby bushes. Suman started crying and the navy men located the refugees and arrested them all. Mary Gracy and Suman were taken to Mannar and later transferred to the Anuradhapura prison. Suman was released after spending five days. Mary Gracy was booked under the Passport Act for illegally leaving the country. The inmates were asked to clean the toilets, water the plants and given all kinds of odd jobs.

Life was miserable for her in the prison where she had to spend time with hard core criminals. At times she broke into tears, she was frustrated with life, one fine day she had an unusual visitor " I saw Fr.Vinny Joseph SJ, the JRS Director, who had come to visit me. I was so happy as I knew him as a refugee in India. The consoling words he spoke instilled new vigour and confidence in me to spend the rest of the days in prison peacefully. I'm ever thankful to him!"

She spent 71 days and her mother spent Rs.200,000 as fine in the court and got her released. Her thirst to be with her husband instigated her to take up the adventure of reaching her husband along with her son. She successfully reached Indian shores on the 6/02/06 along with her son. She spent 15 days in the quarantine and released into the camp. The government has accepted her request to move to the Salem camp to live with her husband. Adventurous Mary is once again all smiles as she prepares for a reunification with her husband.

Arichalmunai Stories (20-21/09/06)

Life is precious than money

S.Vijayaraman is 52, married to V.Jayabharathi, 39. The couple has 7 kids, 4 sons and 3 daughters. They were living in the Hindu college vicinity till they were destined to reach Vavuniya to meet Vijayaraman's 82 year old ailing mother living with his sister. The entire family left for Vavuniya on the 5th of August 2006 for the last time as the A9 National highway connecting Jaffna to Vavuniya was shut down following the escalation of the ceasefire civil war at Muhamalai. Vijayaraman was successfully running a hotel at Jaffna till 1987 when the army destroyed it. He took to real estate business and flourished till he was compelled to seek refuge in India after the return of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in 1987. After his return in 1995 he had to be displaced again into the Vanni in 1996 and returned later in 1998 to pursue the same business. He prospered and was doing well. There was all-round good news in Jaffna as the LTTE and the government signed a cease-fire agreement in Feb. 2002. He owned land worth Rs.3, 600,000.

As he saw the ceasefire breaking away he made a decision to meet his mother before it was too late and locked his house to proceed to Vavuniya. On reaching Vavuniya he witnessed the preparations of the armed forces and was prepared for any eventuality. As there was no sign of the highway opening up he feared the future of his children. His eldest son, Madana Gopal 19, was lucky enough to go to Singapore to study. The other six are with him and as a duty bound father he wanted to give them good education. He wanted a peaceful life for them, "*living in Sri Lanka awaiting peace is a distant dream*" says Jayabharathi. She says that the entire family sat together and decided that they could not live in Vavuniya any longer as the security forces questioned their family as they possessed Identity cards issued at Jaffna. Their young daughters Manoranjani, 17 and Madhivani, 15 were the most harassed by the security forces.

"*The family is alarmed as the army is spreading false rumors and takes away teenaged children*" says Vijayaraman. Jayabharathi, says "*The army suspects every Tamil to be a militant, killing and disappearance of civilians are on the rise, if the army tortures civilians how can they expect the peoples' cooperation*". The couple adds that the killing of innocent civilians in Jaffna

has increased in the past few days. A new technique adopted by the uniformed men is to kill people and pour acid on he face to deface the dead body and prevent civilians from identifying the bodies.

On the 18th of Sept. 2006 Vijayaraman pledged his wife's jewels for Rs.30,000. He called up Jaffna and pleaded his friends to take care of his house. He says *'though people in Jaffna have plenty of money there is no way to buy because people fear venturing out, the market too is empty as a result of the closure of the highway'*. The entire family took the bus to Mannar, in the checkpoints they told the security personnel that they were travelling to attend a wedding. On reaching Thalvupadu they found a boatman who agreed to ferry them across the Gulf of Mannar into South India. On the 20th of September he paid Rs.5,000 per head(Srilankan) to the boatmen. The boat meant for four was filled with 15 adults apart from kids. Fearing the Srilankan navy the boatmen dropped the refugees on one of the islets at midnight. At night the water level was rising and the family feared drowning.

At dawn the family was lucky to find a few Indian fishermen arriving like messiahs to pick them up and drop them at Arichalmunai. The entire family is happy to be in India as they feel safe and their lives not in danger anymore. The couple say that they would never return until an everlasting peace dawns the country as they do not want to compromise the future of their children. They say *" It's a never ending problem and we will be the victims and we cannot trust the peace process"*. When asked how it is to be in India with a broad smile the couple say *" We are forgetting our state sponsored miseries a they are countless"*

Returning Home only for peace

Subramaniam is 62 and wife Vaduvamma is 56, they were blessed with 5 boys and 2 girls though Subramaniam was born in Ratnapura his parents were taken to Srilanka as indentured laborers by the British to work in the tea estates. Though he was educated upto 12th standard in English and taught English to the local children he could not get a high post for ethnic reasons. He was employed in the forest department till the anti-Tamil riots of 1978. After the riots he was resettled under the new government scheme at Maharambaikulam in Vavuniya and the government gave him 2 1/2 acres of cultivable land. Sheer hard work bore fruits, as he was able to buy another 3 1/2 acres more and cultivated varieties of cereals. He converted into a Christian in the mid eighties and though the civil war was in full swing his family prospered until the resumption of the fresh undeclared civil war.

The new militarisation of northern Srilanka forced the family to vacate their home as the army took over their 6 acres of land for setting up an army camp. Though the house was spared for them to live the family feared getting caught in the crossfire. Subramaniam along with his two sons and their wives decided to leave Srilanka for good, as he wanted to spend his last years of life in a peaceful atmosphere. His second son Shantakumar, 23 is a Pastor working for Shalom Fellowship Church and was married five months ago to Beula, 19. The young couple wanted to live a life away from violence. They got married at a very young age as they say that youngsters who are single are

always looked with suspicion of being militants by the army and on the other side the militants take away unmarried people to work for them.

On the 19th of september 2006 the entire family took a bus to Mannar and at Thalvpadu they paid Rs.59,000 to the boatmen and reached Arichalmunai along with the other occupants. Subramaniam has no intentions of ever returning to Srilanka as he considers India to be his motherland. Subramaniam hates the very thought of returning home as he says in a very stern voice "***I don't want to return, I don't need anything but peace***".

Dreaded journey to a dreamland

Ravi, 28, his wife Valarmathi 24 and daughter Jhanu 1 1/2 hail from Salli Smabaltheevu in Trincomalee, Ravi was a farmer leading a happy married life during the ceasefire period. His happy life was shattered after the outbreak of recent violence engulfing the whole of Trincomalee region. His village was often a target of both the warring groups as the village was pounded with shells. During the exchange of fire the village was caught in the crossfire, as it was located in between the militant and army controlled areas.

As most of the families took refuge in India and the rest were displaced in Srilanka, Ravi decided to reach India for the sake of his daughter. The shelling would often disturb the child's sleep and she would awake with a shock. Lack of baby food, scarcity of medicine, restriction of movement forced the family to decide on reaching India. As many from his village were moving to India on the 20th of September he sold his wife's jewels as she wanted to leave Srilanka at any cost for the sake of their child. They joined a party of 22 adults and 8 kids to reach Thalvupadu, Mannar in a hired van. Each adult paid Rs.6,000 to the boatmen . Their journey to freedom started at 3.30 p.m and turned into a spine chilling nightmarish boat ride. Their double engine boat got into a problem mid sea as they ran out of fuel and luckily after spending more than two hours being tossed up and down the boat the refugees were lucky as the engine restarted after pouring kerosene and reached Arichalmunai.

The couple showed a sigh of relief like all the other refugees as they had lost hopes of reaching the Indian shores. They were left without anything to eat or drink for more than eight hours in the boat and another six hours on the seashore as they had reached late night. Valarmathi could not control herself seeing her pretty daughter cry out of hunger and fear. The sight of women and children vomiting and crying in fear was to be an unforgettable experience for these refugees as the winds were strong and the tides were high often tossing up the boats along with the inmates.

Valarmathi on reaching Arichalmunai on 21/09/06 gleefully says, "***We are free, without any checkpoints, questionings, torture, harassments, disappearances and killings. My daughter can sleep in peace without the noise of the big guns***".

A Young Leader

Ratnasuriyan is a 23 year old bachelor. He worked as a construction supervisor in the tsunami project for Seva Lanka, a popular local NGO. He hails from Salli Sambaltheevu, a village sandwiched between the Militant and military controlled areas of Trincomalee.

After the recent escalation of the undeclared war between the military and the militants the village took a heavy pounding as it was caught in between the crossfire. The high civilian casualties resulted in the displacement of the entire village comprising 850 families. While 600 families are internally displaced braving bullets and untold misery, 250 families who could afford the long journey to India crossing the Gulf of Mannar reached India.

All the work undertaken by Seva Lanka came to a standstill from April. Ratnasuriyan had no other source of income to meet the expenses of his family as he was the only breadwinner. He decided to reach India where the family could save themselves from starvation. He had saved some money and was in touch with a few friend and extended family members who wanted to seek refuge in India. On the 20th of September 2006, as planned Ratnasuriyan along with 21 adults and 8 kids from the same village hired a van to reach Mannar. During the course of the journey they had to stop at 14 checkpoints, identify themselves and explain the purpose of travel. He took the lead in conveying to the men manning the checkpoints that they were all traveling to Mannar to seek employment in the Seva Lanka branch of Mannar. He produced his identity card issued by Seva Lanka and told the soldiers that they were all people selected by him for employment.

At Morapathane inn Vavuniya district they had to pay Rs.800 and another 1000 rupees to the Mannar police before contacting the boatmen. He negotiated to pay Rs.6,000 per adult to be taken to India in two boats, the boatmen wanted to load the entire crowd of 30 people into a single boat. But the negotiating skills learnt at Seva Lanka prompted him to be more assertive as he agreed to pay half the sum on boarding the boat and the rest on reaching the destination. The boatmen agreed to take the crowd in two boats.

Ratnasuriyan brought the entire crowd to the Thalvapadu coast and facilitated the boarding. He boarded the first boat and they left the Srilankan shore bidding goodbye to their bad memories at 3.30 p.m. On the way the second boat developed a snag as the engine ran short of petrol. Ratnasuriyan was helpless as it was pitch dark. He could only pray for the safety of the others. His boat touched the promised land at 8.30 p.m and they had to walk through the water drenching themselves. On the seashore the darkness frighned one and all but the tension and worry about the safety of the other boat made everyone forget the chill and darkness. His companions were in grief with tears rolling down as their near and dear ones were traveling in the other boat. Was it a right decision to undertake such a hazardous journey? Was it worth all the effort, if so at what cost?. These were the questions doing the rounds. Rathnasuriyan sounded optimistic as he had an inner feeling that the others would reach.

After two hours of nail biting agony the second boat reached Arichalmunai. Ratnasuriyan was the most happiest as he had taken the lead role in carefully and meticulously planning every bit of this journey. He was totally relieved to see everybody reaching safely as he had heard about the hunger of the Bay of Bengal to devour Srilankan refugees in boat capsizes. Ratnasuriyan says '*These two hours were the longest wait in my life*'. He was happy to be in India and hoped to get a suitable job by which he could support his family.

Hoping for a reunion

Saraswathi is 55, a mother of 6 children two girls and two sons are married. The family lived in the Muslim dominated town of Muthur in Trincomalee. The entire town turned into a ghost town in July as the army bombarded the town and compelled the entire population to move out. The militants were in control of the town for a few days. There was not a single soul left in the usually bubbly town. The scared residents were asked to move out of the town and seek refuge in safer places. The civilians had very little time to contact their family members who had ventured out. They took refuge where ever they could. All the Tamils had left Muthur.

Saraswathi moved out of her house with her son Sarvantha Kumar, 19 an AL(advanced level, 12th standard) student with the hope of reuniting with her husband and unmarried daughter. The situation had worsened as days progressed. The killing of 17 aid workers strengthened their fears not to return home. They waited in the relief centre in vain. Saraswathi was too scared of the bleak future of her son if he stayed in Srilanka. All unmarried young men were suspected of being militants by the soldiers and the militants saw them as future warriors among their ranks. Indoctrination and forced training of Tamil men were common. The only way out of this situation was to reach a safe destination. In Srilanka there was none. India could provide their basic necessities.

The love to secure better future prompted Saraswathi to sell her most loved gold chain gifted to her by her husband as a wedding gift and decide on reaching India. The mother and son had a nightmarish journey as the boat ran out of petrol on the dreaded night of 20th September 2006, the boat tossed all its inmates forcing them to vomit and lose hope of reaching the Indian shore. They reached Arichalmunai at 10.30 pm drenched in water and spent the entire night shivering on the seashore. Saraswathi feels the journey was worth the risk as it would secure a better future for her young son. She hoped that she could locate her husband, daughter and other children as she say *“God saved us and reached us safely, I know my husband and other children too would be under his care and we would unite under happier circumstances”*

Escape to freedom

Sangeeta is just 13, she was born when the big guns were on duty. She does not remember when she lost her father as she was too young. She lives with her mother Poovaneshwari, 40 a tailor and brother Akhilan, 19 an auto mechanic. They were living at Kovilkulam in Vavuniya until they decided to seek refuge in India. Back home her mother and brother worked hard to make both ends meet. The ceasefire period was a happy one for them as they thought that good days were ahead of them and Sangeeta could be educated without any interruption.

The outbreak of the undeclared civil war was a bad news to all unmarried young men. Men who claimed to be militants from various groups would visit them and coax as well as threaten Akhilan to join militancy. On the other side the uniformed men were known for taking away unmarried young men. The harassment and suspicion faced by Akhilan at the hands of the uniformed men prompted the family to reach India. Moreover Sangeeta was growing into her mid teens, the most dangerous phase of life for any

Srilankan Tamil girl. She was also a bright student studying IX standard and wanted to pursue her studies at any cost.

On the 20th of September the three of them reached Mannar and paid 15,000 to the boatmen and embarked upon a journey towards freedom. This was a journey Sangeeta could never forget as the boat in which she was traveling stopped in the midsea and nobody knew how to salvage the situation. The refugees were all suffering from nausea and vomiting. Sangeeta thought it was the last few moments of her life and felt sad that her childhood dream of becoming a teacher would never be fulfilled. But suddenly she remembered that Mother Mary of Vellankani in India. Though she is a Hindu, her strong faith in Mary made her to pray vigorously and she took a vow that if they reach India safely, she would tonsure her head.

She was only 8 years old when the ceasefire came into effect in 2002. She does not know the reason for the eruption of the present phase off war. All that she knows is the noise of the big guns which disturbed her sleep and the checkpoints which have come up. She wonders why people fight and harm one another. She is happy to be in India with a plan and a dream. The immediate plan is to tonsure her head and fulfill her vows to Mary at Vellankani and the long term dream is to become a teacher and she feels she is in the right place to fulfill both!

A young mother-in-law

Ranjini is 42, hails from the fishing hamlet of Vankalai in Mannar district. She is the mother of Rosy, 20, already a mother of 2 kids. Ranjini is a widow and she had to save her family. In Srilanka she could not protect her daughter and son-in-law Regan Mewaire, 26. Regan was a fisherman happily married to Rosy when she was only 16. On Diwali (Hindu festival of lights) day in 2004 Regan was returning home after fishing. As he had a stomach upset he just entered the nearby bush to clear his bowels and as he balanced his right hand on the ground a loud thundering noise threw him away a few feet before he could realize what had happened he was unconscious. He woke up at the Kandy hospital to find out that his weight was reduced. His right arm was amputated and he had also lost is right eye completely as result of a severe landmine blast.

After spending 24 days in the hospital an NGO paid him Rs.25,000(Srilankan) to start his own business. With this money he started a new venture, to buy fish from the fishermen and sell it to the wholesale dealers in bulk. It required his presence in the seashore whenever the fishermen returned. As Vankalai is a heavily guarded village it was necessary for him to keep the soldiers happy by supplying fish.

After the undeclared breakdown of the ceasefire in December 2005, bad memories are haunting them again as the army is back in action suspecting all and sundry of being militants. Regan was a natural suspect as he is young and handicapped by the gruesome war. He had to live a life of fear and at the same time earn a living for his family. The soldiers would frequent his home and frisk him away for questioning. These were tough days for his wife and mother-in-law. In Srilankan Tamil customs the bridegroom stays in his in-laws house and thus Regan was staying in his wife's place.

The soldiers would knock at the door at untimely hours and scare the young children in their sleep. Often Ranjini had to run to the army outpost and camp with all the hospital and other records to prove the innocence of Regan. Another family which had returned from India was brutally massacred by the soldiers. This sent a shock wave among all the villagers and became big news. Nobody in the village was safe.

As the harassment increased Regan was shattered and low on self confidence, he was slowly slipping into a deep depression as he felt helpless being the only man in the entire family. He felt he was useless to anyone and life was not worth living. The mantle of keeping the entire flock together was now on the shoulders of Ranjini who earned the daily bread, often ran from pillar to post to get Regan released, cooked at home, took care of her grandchildren and counseled her daughter who was lost in wild thoughts apart from taking vital family decisions.

The number of people seeking refuge in India also increased the family decided to reach India as Ranjini could not bear to see her daughter helplessly cry over her fate. It was a tough decision for the family with a meager income, yet after selling all the valuables they decided to board a boat to India from Talaimannar on 23/08/06. After a tiresome boat journey they reached India and on 30/08/06 they were all shifted to the Kalupatti Srilankan refugee camp from the Mandapam transit camp to begin another unknown journey under the stewardship of the young mother-in-law Ranjini!

Shells have no Mercy

Singaram is from the town of Trincomalle in Eastern Srilanka, this father of 6girls and 2 boys is outspoken for his 74 years of age. He is sad to be a refugee at this age, his father was an Indian married to a Srilankan. Singaram was a fisherman. He lived near the army camp. He would see the shells fly just above their home whenever there was an outbreak of shelling. His wife was paralyzed on the right side after a severe bout of diabetics. She could not get medicine during the days of the 18 years of civil war.

The family breathed a sigh of relief after the ceasefire which was to be short lived. The fear of living under the nose of death was traumatic. Death would often whisper in the ears of these old couple. Singaram says, "Shells have no mercy, I need to live to take care of my handicapped wife". Though Singaram says that he has lived life to the maximum, nobody has the right to take of human live as it cannot be replaced again.

He has no hopes of peace prospects in Srilanka in the near future as he says, "Only God can solve this problem". He is at least happy that he can die peacefully without succumbing to a sharpnel. He had to undertake a risky journey to Vavuniya and then to Talaimannar to board a boat along with his wife, daughter and her family. Each adult paid Rs.7,500(Srilankan). On reaching India on 23/08/06, they were taken to the Mandapam transit camp, later on 30/08/06 they were shifted to the stuffy Kalupatti refugee camp where a community hall houses them.

"The hall is too small to house 130 people, half the crowd are made to stay on the terrace, which is covered by a thin thatched roof where the sun and heat waves easily penetrate as it is open on all sides. The place is severely infested with blood thirsty

mosquitoes and the inmates fear an out break of an epidemic as a result. We were promised with better amenities at Mandapam and told we would be shifted to a camp in Madurai town where new houses were awaiting us”. Though conditions are tough here Singaram says, “There is no shelling and no shell approaching us without mercy”.

A young family lives another day

Pipiyana is from the coastal village of Arripu in Mannar district. This mother of a 4 year old daughter and 4 months old son is only 23. Her husband Muralidharan who worked as a fisherman is 30 years old. Arippu is a small village classified as semi-cleared area as both the army and the militants reign over it. It is difficult for the residents of the village to please both the administrators. The village is a fertile recruitment ground for the militants and a great source of making a fast buck for the soldiers.

For every basket of fish caught the fisherman has to pay a prescribed sum as a contribution to the militants. They also need to present the best of their catch to the army men. Pipiyana was less than 18 when she was married. She says that it was a good decision as it has saved her life as well as that of her husband as young men and women are taken away by the militants for fighting. If they escape the claws of the militants they suffer at the hands of the soldiers who harass them without an end.

Pipiyana says that even married people are taken away for training by the militants. They had to hide in their own house and sometimes with their relatives elsewhere. After the resumption of the undeclared civil war in December 2005, the militants visited the house of Piipiyana and forced Muralidharan to join the training camp. As Pipiyana was pregnant with the second child, they spared him and asked him to join them later.

After the birth of a son the entire family knew no bounds of joy and were celebrating only to be disturbed again by the militants as they had come to take Muralidharan to train him. When he sought some time, it was granted. Meanwhile the army tracked his house as they got to know the visit of the militants. They presumed that Muralidharan was operating for the militants from his house. They would not be convinced that he was innocent. They would often return to harass him. Frustrated by the turn of events Pipiyana wanted the family to seek refuge in India to relive a joyous life with their new born son.

On 23/08/06, they paid Rs. 11,000 (Srilankan) to the boatmen at Talaimannar and reached India. Pipiyana and her family now stay at Kalupatti refugee camp in Madurai district where Muralidharan had got the permission to work as a coolie and earn a living for the family. Though the camp conditions are bad, Pipiyana says, “I feel bad as there is no privacy, especially for young couple but now there is no fear of running away from the militants or the militants”.

Refugee flow continues amidst Naval blockade by Srilankan Navy

- Paul Newman from Arichalmunai in Rameshwaram with reports from Mannar in Srilanka

Srilankan refugees reaching India was a nightmare till recently as they had to escape the Srilankan navy, then the Indian Coast guards and Indian Navy. Now the soft attitude of the Indian government towards the Srilankan refugees has gone a long way in lessening their miseries as most boatmen drop the refugees on the shores of Arichalmunai in Rameshwaram. Here the Indian naval personnel shelter them. Their details are collected till humanitarian agencies take them to Munruraja Chatiram after providing tea and biscuits. On reaching Munruraja Chatiram the Tamilnadu police, Q branch, Intelligence Bureau, Corps of Detectives and RAW.

On the other side of the border in Srilankan water if these fleeing refugees are caught they are produced before the Mannar District Magistrate who remands them to judicial custody and imposes a fine on the fleeing refugees and the boatmen. On 21/09/06 , 40 Srilankan civilians wanting to reach India were caught by the Srilankan Navy and handed over to the local police along with 4 boatmen from Talaimannar. Navy fired warning shots to stop the boats when the boatmen failed to obey the orders of the SLN patrol craft finally succeeding in arresting all the fleeing Srilanka civilians who hail from Mannar, Vavuniya and Trincomallee.

S.Vijayaraman from Jaffna, his wife and 6 kids reached India on the 20th of September. He paid Rs.5,000 (Srilankan) to the boatmen. The boat meant for four was filled with 15 adults apart from kids. Fearing the Srilankan navy the boatmen dropped the refugees on one of the islets at midnight. At night the water level was rising and the family feared drowning.

At dawn the family was lucky to find a few Indian fishermen arriving like messiahs to pick them up and drop them at Arichalmunai. He says *'though people in Jaffna have plenty of money there is no way to buy because people fear venturing out, the market too is empty as a result of the closure of the highway'*. According to him the army is spreading false rumors and taking away teenaged children . His wife V.Jayabharathi, 39 says *"The army suspects every Tamil to be a militant, killing and disappearance of civilians are on the rise, if the army tortures civilians how can they expect the peoples' cooperation"*. The couple adds that the killing of innocent civilians in Jaffna has increased in the past few days. A new technique adopted by the uniformed men is to kill people and pour acid on the face to deface the dead body and prevent civilians from identifying the bodies.

Another couple from Trincomalee, Ravi, 28, his wife Valarmathi 24 and daughter Jhanu 1 1/2 had a spine -chilling boat ride. Their double engine boat in which they traveled got into a problem mid sea as they ran out of fuel and luckily after spending more than two hours being tossed up and down the boat the refugees were lucky as the engine restarted after pouring kerosene and reached Arichalmunai. The couple showed a sigh of relief like all the other refugees as they had lost hopes of reaching the Indian shores. They were left without anything to eat or drink for more than eight hours in the boat and another six hours on the sea shore as they had reached late night. The sight of

women and children vomiting and crying in fear was to be an unforgettable experience for these refugees as the winds are strong and the tides are high often tossing up the boats along with the inmates.

Despite these risks of braving the bullets of the Srilankan army on land then the navy in sea and completely at the mercy of the sea Gods these refugees have smile on their face and feel welcomed. Valarmathi who reached Arichalmunai on 21/09/06 gleefully says " We are free, without any checkpoints, questionings, torture, harassments, disappearances and killings. My daughter can sleep in peace without the noise of the big guns".

Early Marriages good for Srilankan Tamils!

A good number of refugees reaching the Indian shores are looking young, may be in their teens or just out of it. In Srilanka the minimum age for marriage is 18 years. Under normal circumstances girls get married anywhere between 24 to 26 and boys between 28 to 30. The complex fear psychosis, which prevails in the war zones, has led to the reduction in the age of marriage. As the legal system has other better works to concentrate during the course of war, these early marriages are seen as a passing phase.

Selvi, 46 is already a grandmother of two. Her daughter Sasikala now 21, was married at the age of 17. Their family now living in the Kalupatti refugee camp in Madurai district in India were residents of Vankalai in Mannar district. The checkpoint at Vankalai was a nightmare to the youngsters of the village. The unmarried young men are suspected to be working for the militants and the unmarried girls are seen as sexual objects to the sex starved soldiers posted to the northern parts of Srilanka from the Sinhala south. It becomes easy for married people to pass through these checkpoints.

Jeevan 22, from Vavuniya, father of a one-year-old son always carried his son when he went out as a precautionary measure. His folks at home too were very comfortable if he went with his son as they were sure of his return home. Srilanka has a notorious past of disappearances of young men and women in the 1990s. After the resumption of the undeclared civil war forced disappearances, arbitrary killings and unnecessary harassment of young people especially those in between the age of 14 to 30 has witnessed a sharp rise.

Shantakumar, 23 is a Pastor working for Shalom Fellowship Church and was married five months ago to Beula, 19. The young couple wanted to live a life away from violence. They got married at a very young age as they say that youngsters who are single are always looked with suspicion of being militants by the army and on the other side the militants take away unmarried people to work for them.

There is also a perceived fear that young girls and boys are forcibly taken away by the militants to fight for the Tamil cause. They expect every family to contribute by sending young people to join the militant struggle. A very strict discipline is maintained within the militant structure. Boys and girls are not allowed to meet and mix freely. Sexual

relationship invites severe corporal punishment. Girls serving in the LTTE can get married after the age of 24 and men after 28. Parents too like their children to get married as a measure of safety rather than becoming victims, though they know the hardships of early marriages.

On the negative side, the disruption of normal life has led to youngsters keeping away from productive activities and fall prey to teenage fantasies and infatuation. Their long stay in the welfare centers and refugee camps where privacy is a non-entity has proved to be a decisive factor. The young girls and boys are taken up by the film culture and experiment a family life by becoming husband and wife. In case of opposition from parents, they elope and later regret their action.

Godwyn at present a camp refugee at Gopalsamudram sought refuge in India along with his mother, 3 brothers and 2 sisters. On reaching India, Godwyn joined school and was doing well but the dastardly killing of Rajiv Gandhi abruptly ended Godwyn's dreams along with the dreams of youngsters like him as the government of Tamilnadu banned education for Srilanka refugees as a backlash of Rajiv's killing.

Disturbed by the turn of events, Godwyn, heart broken now had nothing to do. He was infatuated and fell in love with Shantini. Her parents objected to this relationship but Godwyn then, only 18 eloped with Shanthini who was then 16. Within a year they had a son and they had to face many difficulties for which they were not prepared. They were neither physically prepared nor mentally to address the issues of a married life. He attributes this to the free society and lack of formation along with closed camp conditions to his teenage waywardness. He regrets his decision and feels that at such a young age couples are not matured enough to cope up to the pressures of a married life and parenthood.

Throughout the world the early marriages are a thing of the past, in many cultures the institution of marriage itself is a big question, as live-in relationships are becoming more popular. The Srilankan Tamil community is going a step backward, forced by circumstances, many unprepared youngsters are thrust upon the big burden of carrying the future of their partners on their slender shoulders.

T.Kalupatti, a Srilankan refugee camp set up on 30/08/06

T.Kalupatti, is a newly set up Srilankan refugee camp. Located about forty kilometers from Madurai, the camp is housed next to the bus station in a government marriage hall. 30 families with 130 individuals live here. Most of them reached India after the second week of august 2006. At the Mandapam transit camp where the conditions were much better with individual houses they were told by the police that they had to pack their luggage as they were to be shifted to a new camp. They were promised with better amenities and told they would be shifted to a camp in Madurai town where new houses were awaiting them.

At the hall there is no proper ventilation. There are no partitions inside. There is absolutely no privacy. The toilets are the only saving grace as men and women use it as

a dressing room too. Most families stay under the huge neem trees around. There are a number of infants who find it most difficult to stay indoors as the fuming heat makes it impossible for people to stay indoors. The parents have made cradles of dhotis and tied them in the trees. A new born child and his mother were still in hospital even after many days as there was no proper place for the newborn and his mother in the camp.

The hall is too small to house 130 people so half of them are made to stay on the terrace. The terrace is covered by a thin thatched roof where the sun and heat waves easily penetrate as it is open on all sides. The place is severely infested with blood thirsty mosquitoes and the inmates fear an out break of an epidemic as a result. Though these people are staying here for more than twenty five days no arrangements for providing education to the students have been made.

All the refugees cook outside with the bare minimum utensils they have and take turns in consuming the cooked food as a result of shortage of eating plates and drinking glasses. The loud noise of the buses entering and departing the bus station makes it difficult for the refugees to have a peaceful sleep.

The monsoon is set to begin and the refugees are scared of the heavy rains that would lash the camp as they have no other place to go. The overcrowded camp has no breathing place for the refugees in case of heavy rains. If these conditions prevail the refugees are in for a lot of trouble as they do not have enough clothes to change over if they are drenched in the rain, nor do they have bed sheets to cover and their children from the cool breeze that accompanies the rain.

Their only hope is the promise by the Tashildar who had told them that they would be shifted to Uchchipatti with better facilities including individual houses. This would be possible only after the local elections.

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