

**FACT FINDING MISSION – MUTTUR
TRINCOMALEE DISTRICT – 06 AUGUST 2006
CONSORTIUM OF HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES (CHA)**

Overview

1. The last three days of conflict in the town of Muttur between the Security Forces (SF) of the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the LTTE prompted a mass exodus of people from Muttur by foot amidst severe insecurity and risk en-route to Kantale. Both the GoSL and the LTTE claimed total control of Muttur town and the strategic jetty. The fate of many were unknown and access for humanitarian aid for those who remained in Muttur and injured en-route was denied. A team of CHA staff undertook a fact finding mission to assess the overall situation by proceeding to Kantale and then gain access to Thoppur and if possible to Muttur, to report to its membership on the ground reality, for effective relief coordination.

Mission

2. On arrival to Kantale and interviewing a few displaced people who had arrived the previous day by from Muttur, it was felt that Muttur need to be accessed as there were conflicting reports of many dead and injured en-route and in the Muttur town who needed immediate attention. Reports were that the area was still not conducive for travel to Muttur as shelling was in progress. The intent was to proceed as close as possible to Muttur to assess the situation proper.

Travel Route

3. Route taken to proceed to Muttur was Kantale, Potankadu, Sirimangalapura, Serunuwera, Somapura, Kiliveddi, Palattadichchenai and Muttur. From Kantale to Somapura the route is inhabited by the majority Sinhalese. The rest up to Killivedi in pockets with muslims and Killivedi to Pallattadichchenai majority being the tamils. The rest to Muttur are Muslims and the Muttur town limits with majority muslims, a percentage of tamils and a very small percentage of Sinhalese.

Military Checkpoint

4. The first proper check point for registration was at Sirimangalapura where CHA personnel had to get authority to proceed. Surprisingly, authority to proceed to Muttur was granted on the condition that we did not cross over to the uncleared area as security could not be guaranteed. An ICRC convoy and two ACF vehicles too were at the check point that was granted authority to proceed.

5. Just as we passed the military checkpoint we saw some villagers (Sinhala Village) on the road obstructing the route. However, we passed the location without any incident. (We later got to know that the ICRC convoy and the other two vehicles were denied access by the villagers).

Scarcity of Water

6. There was a distinct shortage of water for the villagers of Somapura and Serunuwara en-route. UNICEF and Government water bowsers were seen distributing

drinking water to queues of people. Mini camps with request for food and drinking water were seen en-route. Irrigation water channels were bone dry. The affected people of Serunuwara need parallel attention in the form of drinking water, food and medical aid.

Ghost Towns

7. The mini towns after Serunuwara were like ghost towns. There were no one around in any of the houses, which seems to have been evacuated in a mighty hurry. Kiliveddy, a predominantly tamil town was completely deserted. A lone cyclist on his way from Thoppur was intercepted and inquired of the people around. He said that everybody has either left to Kantale, or to LTTE controlled Ichchlampattai.



War Zone

8. En-route there were a few military checkpoints who on inquiring our mission allowed access to proceed to Muttur. On passing Palattadichcheni, we came across two ambulances off the road with a crater on the ground due to either a landmine or shelling. The area looked a typical war zone with blood strewn on and around the wrecked ambulances with personal belongings of the probable injured evacuees around the vehicles.



9. Further towards Muttur, the result of shelling and firing were evident with more craters on the road and severing of concrete light posts with dangling electricity cables.



Muttur Town

10. On entering Muttur town, we were quizzed suspiciously by SF personnel. Once we explained our mission, they were cooperative and directed us to their command post. At the command post we were met by an Army Officer who explained the events leading to the displacement and the damaged caused to the town. He was critical of the LTTE, but assured that we are now safe and could go around the town without any fear. His request was for the restoration of electricity, the re function of the base hospital and for the people to move back to Muttur that they will provide the needed security. Soldiers were seen trying to restore limited electricity.



11. On a quick tour of the town limits including the controversial jetty, it was evident that the town was under the total control of the GoSL.

Fate of ACF Humanitarian Staff – Muttur

12. There were unconfirmed reports of ACF staff in Muttur either being killed or missing following the confrontation. Inquiries were made of the whereabouts of the humanitarian staff from the SF personnel and the civilians. Most of the SF personnel stated that they are not aware as they had come in as reinforcements and were involved in consolidating their own positions and taking account of their losses. Civilians too said that they were unaware but directed us to the office.

13. Whilst proceeding in the vehicle to the ACF office in Muttur town, a civilian in a motorcycle informed us that the staff had been all killed and he could lead us to the office site. On approaching the office, we came across this gruesome sight of bodies with a very strong stench. The bodies were all face downwards on the front lawn, seemingly lined up and shot at very close range. The sight was too much to handle.

14. Somehow, it was felt that evidence was a necessity and to ensure that they all are staff of ACF. The civilian who accompanied us confirmed that they are all ACF staff. Most of the deceased were wearing ACF agency T-shirts. When inquired how he was sure that they were all ACF staff he stated that, the bodies of others in the town had been claimed and funeral rights done and these bodies need to be claimed by next-of-kin of the deceased. He said he was aware of a deceased who is a Muslim male but not from Muttur and are unable to perform funeral rights without the authority of the family.

15. Eerie and risky, though, we went into the ACF office compound and the office proper over and around the bodies to look for tell tales and any other evidence. The office rooms looked as being ransacked except for the front room securely padlocked. We counted bodies of eleven males and four females Helpless; we withdrew with some evidence in hand. We thanked the civilian who accompanied us and advised to take care of himself.

Displaced Civilians

16. We went around the town speaking to civilians of their needs. The displaced were in the following locations all within the town limits;

- Muttur Muslim Ladies College
- Al-Hilal Boys Maha Vidyalaya
- Agricultural Production Centre Building
- Anachenai Mosque
- Periyapala Mosque
- Muttur Arabic College



17. Food rations are available for a very few days as individual donors had arrived and given them supplies. The immediate needs indicated by the people were;

- Ensure personal safety and security
- Immediate halt to shelling as it's traumatic for the survivors.
- Guarantee of security by the Government
- Restoration of Electricity
- Restoration of telephone facilities - communication
- Operation of the Muttur hospital
- Urgent need for medical supplies and doctors
- Return to normalcy – they cannot live under these circumstances

Plea for Casualty evacuation – Sahayapuram

18. The people of Muttur were pleading with us to negotiate with the LTTE and give them access to evacuate casualties who are reportedly still lying close to Sahayapuram off the 64th Mile Post and to recover the dead to give a decent burial. As per the civilians these were the people who during their mass exodus were re-routed by the LTTE and are trapped following shelling. Unconfirmed reports of bodies of fleeing muslim youths segregated by the LTTE and having been shot are also lying in the same vicinity.

Jetty of Muttur

19. The controversial jetty was visited to see who was in real control amidst claim by the LTTE of having total control. The jetty is under the control of the military and we spoke to the Commanding Officer. He took us around the jetty and briefed of the incoming shelling they received which had caused severe damage to civilian property and infrastructure.



Sounds of Shelling

20. By evening we heard sounds of shelling, both mortar and artillery firing, though not in the very close proximity, were concerned of our exit of Muttur and en-route travel to Kantale via the same route.

Exiting Muttur

21. Having gathered the required information the team left Muttur still feeling helpless, as peoples expectation were humanitarian relief and not someone to come at this juncture to collect information and provide solace only in the form of words. Whilst

they were humble in accepting our reasons, they requested that their need be taken care sooner than later.

22. The people expressed their total dissatisfaction over the government officials and relevant politicians who have not taken the effort to visit and look into their needs at least now when it is conducive for them visit. They feel that they are battered both by the government and the LTTE for strategical and political gains.

Iridiyapuram Displacement

23. On our way out of Muttur, on driving a few kilometers, a lone old man gestured us to stop. He had come out of the Iridiaandawan Church in Iridiyapuram. He was requesting for food as he and so many others in the church have had no food for the last few days. Whilst in conversation we saw women and children in numbers coming towards us from the church with the hope of receiving aid.

24. When we explained our mission and the unavailability of aid with us at this moment, the disappointment was evident. These are all tamil families displaced due to the confrontation who are living in total fear. Unlike in Muttur where some stocks are available, these families numbering 250 families as per their count are without any. They cannot move either ways, they are caught in the government controlled area surrounded by different ethnic groups, military and the LTTE as sitting ducks with no source of food whatsoever. A pathetic state of affairs. Guilty as ever we left them assuring that we would do our best.

Family in Palattadichchenai

25. Once again in Palattadichchnai, a tamil family walked on to the road and requested for aid. They said that a shell fell into their village and all the people left the. Since they had nowhere to go they stayed back and have nothing to survive.

Danger En-route

26. At Palathoppur, civilians whom we met on our way to Muttur, informed us that the ICRC convoy at Serunuwara had been turned away after pelting the convoy with stones (unconfirmed) by the villagers of Serunuwara and for us to take great care.

27. We drove through, Serunuwara with caution but did not face any hostility.

Chaotic Kantale

28. With first hand information we arrived to Kantale late evening to share our information. Kantale suddenly seemed to be full of officials than the displaced. We could not access any of the officials as they were busy individually and engaged in meetings etc. A losing battle to get some authorized high ranking official/s to give us a hearing, that too worthwhile, we proceeded to the CHA Trincomalee District Office to inform those concerned in Colombo.

Immediate Need

29. The following are recommended;

- Government and military to take lead role in securing safe passage through Sinhala Villages for relief to reach those in and en-route to Muttur (including Serunuwara).
- Government and humanitarian joint effort to proceed to Muttur immediately to investigate on the gruesome deaths of the ACF staff, identify the dead, recover their bodies and hand over to their next of kin for a decent burial.
- Government led humanitarian effort to reach those suspected casualties dying due to neglect in Sahayapuram (off 64th Mile Post) and recover dead bodies (as told by Muttur civilians) and hand over to next of kin.
- Provide relief to those displaced in Muttur (5000 people), 250 families in Idiyapuram church and those isolated families en-route.
- Government to retain evidence and investigate the circumstances leading to the;
 - Killing of ACF staff.
 - Attack on two ambulances
 - Killing of civilians in Sahyapuram – on inquiry.

Conclusion

30. A concerted effort by all actors within the humanitarian sector, government and the LTTE is required to ensure the safety of civilians and un-denied humanitarian access to the destitute. Consequences could be far reaching if serious remedial action is not taken now.

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HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES