

THE EXODUS FROM JAFFNA

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"However, the greatest death and destruction, loss and grief, dislocation and relocation, are associated with the man made disasters that have occurred through warfare. The slaying of man by man in either direct combat or through sophisticated weaponry bring cruel mutilating injuries and sudden untimely violent deaths. Such deaths bring little opportunity for the healing process of physicians or the healing rituals of grief. And, of course, warfare destroys the house and habitants, the livelihoods and even lives of many non-combatants.....Mankind's capacity to create psychic trauma through war, to create horrifying forms of warfare, has increased exponentially."

- Prof. Beverly Raphael from Australia in her treatise

" When Disaster Strikes. "

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Introduction

When the government forces launched their drive towards Jaffna at the beginning of October, the people were once more caught between the callousness of the Government and the LTTE to whom the civilians mattered little. The Government, while using the rhetoric of "liberating the Tamils from the clutches of the LTTE", had little tangible conception of the welfare of the Tamil people. It had supposedly air-dropped leaflets which never reached them, asking people to seek shelter in schools and places of worship. People were also advised to keep away from the LTTE. All this was too vague. By the seemingly random manner in which the government forces were bombing and shelling, these instructions made no practical sense to the people. At times even schools and places of worship were hit. Against the backdrop of heavy shelling and aerial bombing, most of the people decided not to take a risk and sought refuge mostly around Jaffna town. In their experience, there was nothing 'liberating' in the Government's actions.

On the other hand, the LTTE, apart from making the claim that it would fight to the last man to prevent Jaffna from falling, took no responsibility for the civilian population that it claimed to represent. An observation about recent LTTE practice is that they did not, unlike in the mid-80s, use their own cadre as sentries to monitor enemy movements. In the past these young sentries used to be the first casualties in any offensive action. Then several militant groups operated in competition. The posting of sentries in those days also served the public relations function of giving the civilians a picture that they were living behind a border under the protection of the militants. This early warning role in recent times has been played, instead, by civilians who were not conscious of their role. In the event of firing noises now, LTTE forces rushing into an area would ask civilians for information on enemy movements. Once the army had significantly expanded its perimeter in Jaffna and used mobile limited operations, it had become a war without borders in which the civilians had this new role.

Certain aspects of the LTTE's thinking had however begun to surface since the government forces' abortive military operation this July. Heavy shelling had caused the majority of the population to flee. But those who had remained behind found government troops far better behaved than what the previous phases of the war and LTTE propaganda had led them to expect. The troops had withdrawn by 19th July and word got around that army behaviour had been friendly or at least tolerable. This was evidently annoying to the LTTE. A number of those who had remained behind had been questioned or otherwise harassed by the LTTE allegedly under suspicion of being informers to the government forces.

The LTTE thought it had successfully moulded the people for six years and more to view them as liberators and be slavishly obedient to them. The notion that they could live under government control and manage their affairs struck at the roots of the LTTE's ideological edifice. This time, in October, the LTTE encouraged and even forced the civilians to vacate as the government troops advanced. Apart from the heavy bombing and shelling, also in the minds of the people was the Indian Army's advance in October 1987, exactly 8 years earlier. Many people had then remained behind in their areas. The LTTE then, as happened again in 1990, provoked the army from near places of civilian refuge and ran away. The worst incident of this kind at that time was in Jaffna Hospital.

The foregoing incident featured prominently in recent discussions among Jaffna Hospital doctors on the decisions they had to take concerning the hospital. Just about 4 members of the LTTE had been in the hospital in 1987 when the Indian army column came near. Having thrown one grenade and fired shots which claimed several casualties, the four had run through the hospital and escaped. About 70 patients and medical staff died during the subsequent Indian army action. (Many civilians died from indiscriminate action by the Indian Army causing a total civilian death toll of 800 - 1500 for the entire operation of taking Jaffna in 1987.)

This time because the civilians had left Jaffna ahead of the advancing Sri Lankan army, the death toll for October was about 100, more than a half of it owing to aerial bombing well outside fighting zones. The comparatively low death toll owed very little to any initiative on the part of the Government. [The civilian death toll for November, to give rough estimates, would be about 30 from bombing and shelling and 300, very conservatively, from causes directly related to the forced exodus resulting in disease and debility. Most deaths taking place outside hospitals are unaccounted.]

On 26th October air force bombing claimed the lives of 10 refugees from Urumpirai camping at the edge of Jaffna's city limits in Ariyalai East. On the 28th began the decisive battle for Neervely, 6 miles up the Pt. Pedro Road from Jaffna. The battle was intense because, according to civilians, an LTTE counter-attack happened to have coincided with the army advance. Shelling by the army on the 29th morning fell at the edge of Jaffna's northern city limits. On that day about 42 civilians died because of aerial bombing in civilian areas outside town, far from the combat zone. A further 4 died because of shelling. Two shells fell in Gurunagar, inside city limits and facing the lagoon to the south. Although people were terrified by the noise, the city remained fairly safe.

In the first phase, by the 5th of October, the government forces had brought Puttur under control. The LTTE launched a counter-thrust similar to that of 14th July 1995 in Allaveddy. This time's counter offensive by the LTTE ended in catastrophe with the latter losing more than 150 seasoned cadre. From what emerged from top ranking LTTE leaders, they had accepted the likelihood of losing Jaffna. A decision had been taken that if the army persisted in its advance the LTTE would vacate and revert to guerilla warfare centred about the Vanni (Wanni) jungles. Yet for civilian consumption the rhetoric of fighting the 'final battle' and pushing the army out of Jaffna was kept up!

We may remark at this point some reasons for the army's calling off the July advance. A common belief in the South attributes as the main reason the LTTE's thrust on 14th July which resulted in 50-100 army casualties. This did perhaps give the army the feeling that it had moved too far too fast. But based on information available to knowledgeable persons in Jaffna, the LTTE itself did not consider the 14th July thrust resulting in about 60 LTTE casualties a success. The army appears to have devised a drill by which an intruding party is trapped. LTTE sources consider this to have happened on 14th July. They also believed that the army had been unaware of having trapped the intruders due to a breakdown in communication at the centre, allowing most of the intruders to escape. The LTTE was not so lucky in October when they tried the same thing at Punnalai Kadduwan and lost about 150 fighters.

The LTTE seems to have believed that the main reason for the army's calling off the July operation was the civilians' fleeing (mostly because of heavy shelling) the area where the Government hoped to set up its civil administration. The way LTTE analysts read the Government's plans for the October advance following the initial moves, was that on reaching Kopay, the army would change course, move Kaithady and then bring Chemmani (Navatkuli) bridge under their control. There was also speculation that another party would come from Pooneryn by sea and both together would block the Chemmani and railway bridges. This would have prevented the civilian population from moving out of Valikamam.

But this did not happen. Confusion in Government thinking made the lot of civilians far worse. There seemed to be no unity between the Government and the army, or within the army itself, on whether they wanted the civilians to stay or go. The Government for its part talked of restoring civil administration and accelerating reconstruction, but gave no clear instructions to the people. As barbaric (and barbarous) a means of communication as it was, when the army shelled certain areas, the people took it as a message to go. The army was happier when the civilians left as it made their work easier. When civilians inadvertently got 'caught' to the army, they were encouraged to flee.

By 30th October 200,000 or so refugees in the Valikamam division (the western sector of Jaffna peninsula including the city, separated from the rest of the peninsula, i.e. Thenmaratchi and Vadamaratchi, by two lagoons) had moved into Jaffna and other centres (Jaffna University, Jaffna College in Vaddukodai and Uduvil Girls' School, among others). The refugees felt that by using available institutional connections and international NGOs to communicate with the authorities in Colombo, their security could be adequately looked after. They were determined to stay put and move into their homes once the army took control. In all, together with the population in Jaffna and suburbs, about 350,000 people were involved.

But following the LTTE announcement on 30th October and intimidation during the subsequent days, by 16th November the City of Jaffna for the first time in its 600 year history was almost empty. The trauma was extremely painful both mentally and physically. Why did the 'Liberators' do this?

It would often be mistaken to look for rational or justifiable reasons for a particular action of the LTTE's. In terms of its totalitarian aims, it has acquired an instinct for what developments are favourable and what are not. As an

institution it has learnt through years of experience. It is quite capable of taking a precipitate decision with little or no forward planning, and then manoeuvring the developments to its advantage.

To begin with, having decided to quit Jaffna and revert to guerilla tactics, as in October 1987, it made no rational sense for the LTTE to turn the City of Jaffna into a final battle zone and bring enormous suffering and loss to the civilian population. For its brand of politics it is useful to turn Jaffna into a stage for the enactment of 'martyrdom' and a city supposedly destroyed by the enemy. The drama would be relished by Tamil nationalists abroad, irrespective of the cost to cadre and people.

If one were to look for reasons for the exodus order in the utterances of LTTE leaders and in past developments, it is perhaps not so much the imminent possibility of the Government's controlling the area and setting up a civil administration that bothered the LTTE. The drama put on by the LTTE after the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 precipitating war, showed that it was rattled by the notion of sharing power with the rival Tamil groups it had disabled by force and terror in 1986 (i.e., with 'traitors' in LTTE parlance). In late 1988, the North-East Administration being in the hands of the EPRLF had sent the LTTE scurrying into talks with the arch-enemy, the 'Sinhalese Government' in Colombo. This time round, Thamichelvan, chief of the LTTE's political wing, in his address at Jaffna Hospital, had displayed strong emotion when he said, "We will never let the EPDP run the civil administration in Jaffna". Also notable is the reckless attempt on the EPDP leader Devananda's life in Colombo in early October.

The loss of Jaffna also meant that the LTTE had lost considerable public resources and infrastructure that helped it to maintain a sizeable standing army. The continuing emphasis on recruitment gives some hint as to why the LTTE is trying to build up a large refugee population in the Vanni. It is partly an attempt to reconstitute what it lost in Jaffna, albeit under much more primitive conditions.

If we have not been moved to question ourselves so far after what has happened all these years, we as Tamils should do so now before it is too late for our community. Our documentation, as always, is based on the experiences of the victims. [\[Top\]](#)

The Exodus: Varying Claims and Perceptions

On the evening of 30th October, LTTE loudspeakers announced in Jaffna town: "No one must take this announcement lightly. We are doing battle intensely and bravely with a demonic force. It will attack us from several directions. We too will respond likewise. Since we are going to resist every inch against a state drunk with racism, you people must evacuate for Thenmaratchi and Vadamarachi this same night." LTTE men then went from house to house and ordered people to evacuate. They were told, "Jaffna town would soon become a battle zone. We are blowing up Chemmani bridge at 4.00 a.m. If you are not out by then, you will have to remain and face the consequences." By 6.30 p.m. Kandy Road was blocked by panic stricken people trying to leave on foot. A man who decided not to leave and went 300 yards to discuss plans with another family said that owing to the press of the multitude, the journey took him two hours.

There had evidently been privileged sections of the civilian population who had received prior notice of the exodus and had made an early exit with their moveable property. On the 30th evening people in different places were told different things. Some were told that the Chemmani Bridge (Navatkuli Bridge) would be blown up at twelve mid-night. In Uduvil people were told that the army would soon subject the area to a rain of shells. Four shells were fired into the area, which were later identified by the people as LTTE shells. People in Jaffna town were told that an army attack from Mandathivu is imminent.

Chemmani Bridge was never blown up as threatened. On the morning of that same day, the LTTE had made a proclamation of 'War-time Exigency' through loudspeakers. It was that night, after the exodus order, that the people found out what it meant.

Those in Jaffna who switched on to the LTTE's radio bulletin that night were astonished to discover that no reference was made to the exodus that had been ordered. In the days that followed, while doing everything to force civilians to leave Jaffna, the LTTE went on denying that it had ordered people to do so.

There had been a steady exodus of people from Jaffna fleeing the fighting and the bombing and shelling, owing to the fact that the Government had failed in its duty to give confidence to the civilians that tangible measures for their safety had been taken. What is worse, it was denying or greatly underplaying civilian casualties and suffering behind a mask of censorship. By its reprimand (and subsequent suspension) of the Government Agent of Jaffna, the Government was behaving as though it was treachery to talk about such matters - an ironical position for a Government that had staked much on openness, democracy, political accommodation and human rights.

On 3rd November the Spokesman for the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali issued the following statement: "Reports of the massive displacement of the civilian population in northern Sri Lanka are a source of deep concern to the Secretary General. It is evident that humanitarian assistance on a significant scale will be essential to minimise suffering..."

In the days that followed scores of foreign journalists came to this country to follow up the story. The Government too panicked as it came to be revealed that owing to excusable delays as well as some obstruction from the government and military machinery, there had been a significant shortfall in the food rations sent to civilians in Jaffna. It thus continued to prevent foreign journalists from going to the North. In addition to rebuffing the U.N. concern, the government (Ministry of Defence) also blocked relief workers, including doctors, from going into the refugee area. It appeared that the government wanted to hide the developing disaster from the rest of the world. Foreign journalists had therefore to be content talking to civilians coming from the North. Most civilians were afraid to talk. Nevertheless, the international media soon came to blame the LTTE for engineering a forced exodus, and thus pushing to extremes a humanitarian crisis already resulting from the military advance.

The truth however could not be denied where the people were concerned. The LTTE offered an oblique rationalisation in an appeal for recruitment issued on 8th November and published in the press in Killinochchi (i.e. Eelam) the following day. It read:

"In a single night along a narrow road brimming with water on either side, more than 5 lakhs of people made their exodus from Jaffna carrying only a few urgent requirements. This saga is truly one that causes unbelievable amazement. It was undertaken to escape a genocidal military onslaught. The soul of the nation was melted by the flow of this oceanic waves of humanity. There were expectant women, infants, mothers, the elderly, the sick and injured fighters. Despite the crush they came, sitting, standing, falling and crawling.

"However, through this agonising exodus, our people have given our struggle a miraculous political victory. They have revealed to the world the truth that our people cannot live, and do not wish to live, under Sinhalese military rule. Thus have they displayed their immense patriotic opposition to the Government. The Tigers salute the people for their racial pride..."

The only true claim here concerned the description of the suffering the people were subject to. This was made clear at the end of the same statement that was in effect an admission:

"Given this prospect [of bombing, shelling and genocide of those who fall among Sinhalese forces], warring against Sinhalese forces with a large number of people in Valikamam was dangerous. It would then be as though we gave the enemy the excuse for genocide. Therefore considering the safety of the people and not to have any impediment that would deter us from hitting back at the enemy effectively, it became inevitable for us to order the people to move [emphasis ours] to safer areas... We performed this historic duty with a sense of responsibility."

But to audiences abroad, LTTE propaganda continued to maintain that the exodus was an act of volition on the part of the people. An LTTE front organisation, the International Federation of Tamils issued from a London suburb a statement attributed to the University of Jaffna and allegedly signed by two departmental heads of the Medical Faculty, a professor of Tamil and two others. The statement dated 17th November said:

"We from the University, left Jaffna on 30th October 1995 with hardly anything in our hands. Such was the shelling and the panic caused by the approaching army. The continuing monsoonal weather is also against us. We [are] without proper food, psychologically traumatised... [Having striven for many years for the educational advancement

of our people] today we have left everything to be one with the people. We had walked and cycled many miles in pouring rain on that memorable night of 30th October 1995..."

The story, however, as related by the people is something chilling, as we shall see. It also shows that the ordinary people kept up a sense of justice, decency and good sense despite years of fascist control. To the rulers and their elite partners the people never mattered. Suffering was constantly inflicted on them for military, political or propaganda advantage. [\[Top\]](#)

Prelude to the Exodus

As the army advanced and the people fled, several old people and many animals were left behind. During the early hours of 9th October, after the army was in firm control of the Puttur area, some shells were fired, which fell on the Puttur mission hospital, housing several of the old who were left behind. Nine inmates were killed. Several people in Jaffna identified the LTTE as having fired the shells and interpreted the incident as a punishment meted out to those who remained behind SL Army lines. Others opined that the shells had been meant to fall on nearby Puttur junction, considered a strong point of the SL Army. A few days earlier state television had shown army officers visiting the Methodist Mission and the medical officer in charge had made an innocuous statement to the effect: "We trust God and God will give us peace." For some time the LTTE denied the allegation that it had fired the shells, but later, according to witnesses, tacitly accepted that it had done so. Several of these who had talked to the army and later came into LTTE areas were subject to some harsh questioning. The incident along with the events of July, suggested an increasingly hardening attitude against those wanting to live in army controlled territory, despite the LTTE's inability to offer acceptable alternatives. This had been in the making from 1990 when the LTTE began projecting itself as a state power and started controlling the movement of people. Those from the Islands who were displaced when the SL Army took control in August 1990 had been refused permission by the LTTE to return to the Islands. With all the reservations they had about an essentially alien Sri Lankan Army, most of them, despite their insecurity, would have preferred going back to their homes to being refugees. They have since lived in and around Jaffna.

There were other considerations which prompted the civilians to treat the LTTE's expulsion order of 30th October with dread. Three months earlier at the end of July, the LTTE had experienced its first spectacular military failure in recent times in Manal Aru ('Weli Oya'). More than two hundred very young LTTE cadre on an offensive were mown down. The LTTE immediately blamed the failure on 'traitors'. About two weeks before the October 30th exodus order, 29 or so alleged traitors were executed in the Vanni area following the LTTE's first reverses earlier in the month. A school principal was among those executed. All were claimed to be informers of the SL Army. In the case of an elderly man who was executed, his close relatives claimed that the man's only fault had been that he sometimes drank too much and scolded the LTTE. Those who contemplated remaining behind army lines took these executions as another warning.

It was mentioned earlier that the LTTE took serious note of the failure of its counter-attack in Punnalaikadduwan leading to a radical change of strategy. There was little military activity for a few days thereafter. On 17th October the army launched 'Operation Riveresa (Sunshine)' and resumed its advance towards Jaffna. Soon after the fall of Neerveli, the LTTE began shifting its personnel, stores, equipment and documents out of Jaffna. This further confirms that the LTTE had already decided to quit Jaffna if the army persisted in its advance. At this point, however, the possibility that the LTTE may ask the entire population to quit Jaffna was not taken seriously. The City of Jaffna, unlike Moolai or Puttur, was crucial to civilian life in the area. Where else could these hundreds of thousands of people be provided with schools, a university, banks, shelter, a regional hospital and administrative infrastructure?

As the LTTE began shifting its possessions, there was alarm. The camps with refugees from the Islands and Valikamam North also began to be shifted out to Thenmaratchi and Killinochchi. The dominant question in the minds of people was, "What is to become of us?" On the one hand the LTTE was evasive. Had it told the people of its intentions, there could have been an orderly exodus. The LTTE instead repeated that it would fight to keep the army out, and, even more emphatically, pressed the people to make their contributions to the LTTE's National Defense Fund.

In 1990 the LTTE had launched its liberation tax to which each family had to contribute Rs 10,000 or 2 sovereigns of gold. Even the destitute had to pay this 'once and for all', which was explained as buying shares in the future state of Eelam. It took more than two years of pressure, harassment and even selective detention to force even those without money to borrow and pay up.

The second collection was started after the army's July operation. This time the existing refugees were exempt. But others were charged varying amounts. Some businessmen were charged several lakhs. Those with family members abroad were taxed according to the number and country, irrespective of access to their money; for example, about Rs. 45,000 for a son in Switzerland. Since those living in Jaffna were increasingly poorer and the sums higher, the collection was very slow. The increased harshness of collection methods used left even LTTE supporters disturbed. Four or five persons are known to have died of heart attack during 'negotiations' for the amounts to be paid. There were several scenes such as of a lady with a child falling on her knees and pleading. Amounts which could not be found were demanded with a note of menace. While the army moved nearer, collection meetings were frequently organised where some direct objections were raised: "You are going to take our money and run away". This was strongly denied, and the people were urged to somehow find the money.

In spite of all this emphasis on collection and squeezing out the last cent as it were, as a sacred duty the people owed the LTTE, the LTTE acknowledged no reciprocal obligation. The shortfall in government food supplies to the Jaffna peninsula was being voiced abroad as an example of the Government's genocidal intentions. In the meantime the LTTE, in view of its monopoly over purchase and distribution, had some stocks of rice in Killinochchi. When it came to feeding the people, it fell to the Government Agent of Jaffna to request money from the Government in Colombo for funds to purchase rice from the LTTE for distribution in Jaffna. The LTTE did little to hide the fact that the GA had to function as its stooge.

After bombing or shelling several refugees left Jaffna for Thenmaratchi, but most refugees and residents stayed put. In the city the LTTE made announcements reminding people about the National Defence Fund, saying further that collection offices would be open. By this time a large number of people had gathered in churches, temples, schools and particularly within the ICRC protected Jaffna hospital zone. [\[Top\]](#)

The City of Jaffna:

After 30th October's Exodus Announcement

Apart from the residents, the city was one of refugees. Refugees occupied every public building or institution. The management had once more opened Nallur Kandasamy Kovil premises to the refugees as it had in 1987. The church authorities in Jaffna and Vaddukkoddai had given information about refugees in their institutions to leaders or representatives in Colombo, to be conveyed to the presidential secretariat. The presence of the ICRC was also considerably reassuring.

The Commercial Bank opposite the hospital for example had exhausted its stocks of cash giving one and a half months' advance to its employees and making the balance available to the hospital. Moreover about 60 persons connected with the bank stocked provisions for the month and lived on the premises.

Likewise others chose safe places to stay and made arrangements compatible with their security and private obligations. Many for example went daily to their homes in places outside the conflict zone such as Manipay and Uduvil to feed their animals or tend their gardens. The common understanding was that once the SL Army took over, they would return to their homes. **It was in many ways the most sensible decision under the circumstances. It was also implicit in all these arrangements that the people expected nothing positive from the LTTE. While the Government and its forces were totally alien to them, there was some hope that they could be pressurised to show some consideration towards civilian safety. They had also learnt some lessons on survival from past military onslaughts.**

These preparations were no doubt objectionable to the LTTE. For six years and more the LTTE had cleansed the society of individuals who showed the least signs of independence and had done everything to control their thoughts and actions. These preparations showed that the people had a collective mind of their own, a sense of wanting to preserve something, a way of life or a civilisation, that went beyond their individual interests and

lifespan. Moreover faced with a crisis and caught between two hostile forces neither of which was accountable to them, and with no individual leaders they could trust, their instinctive actions showed an independence their so-called 'sole legitimate representatives' could not stomach. It was also a powerful judgement on the LTTE. The LTTE leadership found itself obliged to do something, if only to postpone the day of reckoning.

On the 300th October evening came the anonymous, yet highly organised and terrifying, order for the exodus. There could be no doubt about who was behind the message. But also significant was the immediate gut reaction of panic to the announcement of the army's supposedly imminent approach which evoked fear based on past experience.

The LTTE announcement had given the people 4 hours to leave. So great was the panic that the people did not know what to take with them. Such was the conditioning of the people that they often forgot their birth and educational certificates and property deeds, but took great care to take along with them their LTTE supplied family cards and receipts of payment to its National Defence Fund. The Kandy and Chemmani Roads were so much packed with people that movement was hardly possible. It was moreover raining heavily. Some seeing the state of people on the road felt demoralised and decided to turn back. Had they got on to the road they would have been able to move neither forwards nor backwards.

The quarter mile from Muthiraisanthai to Nayanmarkadu alone took about 4 hours. Several children either died or were lost in the crush and several of the elderly who attempted the journey just gave up on the way or died of exhaustion. Individual testimonies are difficult to come by. For example, according to witnesses two children died in the crush near Nayanmarkadu. But who they were or from where they came is not known. Likewise with weary elders left behind and sitting along the road or lying down apparently lifeless. These were common scenes. For days thereafter people travelling along the route of the exodus testified to foul smells coming from rotting carcasses and human excreta.

In Vaddukkkodai, where a large number of refugees were at Jaffna College, the LTTE exploded some grenades near the College library to persuade people to quit. They were asked to leave by 7.30 p.m.. People left on bullock carts, bicycles and on foot. At Uduvil Girls' School a grenade was exploded in the school grounds. The flow of humanity continued for two days and more.

A family of strong LTTE sympathisers waited two days in a Jaffna nursing home intending to stay on. They had been very helpful to the LTTE, particularly to injured cadre. Two days after the order was first given, other unknown cadre came and threatened them. They were told that those who did not leave before 4.00 a.m. would be considered traitors and informers to the Sri Lankan Army, and would be punished accordingly. This, if carried out, meant execution. The family set off on foot. The roads were still crowded.

Once out of the town limits, in Chemmani, two miles of the road ran through paddy fields and an abandoned saltern on either side of the road, filled with rain water. The LTTE ordered the people to leave the road and walk through the flood water so as to leave the road free for LTTE vehicles. People continued their journey walking through water with their bags on their heads and children on their shoulders. The water was in places knee deep and sometimes neck deep.

Despite years of imposed subservience, at times the people ran out of patience. In several places, the people refused to obey the LTTE police and get off the road into the water. If one civilian started a fight with the LTTE police, the others joined in spontaneously with little thought of the consequences. Once a policeman fell on the ground and the crowd walked over him. Other policemen then rushed in to drag their fallen comrade from under the feet of the moving crowd. On another occasion a police-woman was bodily thrown into the flood. The short journey to Chavakacheri took 20 hours.

An 11 year old who came with a group from north of Navaly described his experience: "I travelled in a bullock-cart. My father walked through the flood. We occasionally fought with policemen. They hammered us and we hammered them back. Once they fired above our heads and someone was injured."

There had been much talk among the people of drowning. One group is said to have stepped into a hole hidden by rain water. Some are said to have drowned while walking through the lagoon because of the bursting crowd at

Chemmani (Navatkuli) Bridge. Putting together various accounts, at least 11 people died during the exodus on the night of 30th October, of whom 3 were children and others mostly elderly. During that period the air force aimed bombs at Chemmani Bridge in which two civilians were killed.

Having arrived in Chavakacheri at the height of the rainy season, people had to contend with the near absence of food or shelter. Some who had arrived before the forced exodus considered themselves lucky sharing houses with as many as 70 people. But firewood was scarce and fires were extremely difficult to light. Newer arrivals had to pay Rs.10 or more for a thatched coconut leaf in a very unsatisfactory effort to keep away the rain. Some of them were young mothers carrying infants. Others found standing room under the eaves of houses, with two feet between the outer wall and the rain falling over the edge of the roof. While attending to a call of nature, the neighbour was asked to keep the place like keeping a seat in a crowded train. It was so difficult to find drinking water that people held their umbrellas in the rain and drank the water flowing over its edges.

Throughout the early weeks of this ordeal, as a number of witnesses testified, the LTTE offered no help at all with either relief or organisation. They only provided a free boat service for those wanting to cross Jaffna lagoon into the Vanni. LTTE vehicles went up and down the Chavakacheri -Jaffna road, passing drenched women holding on to infants and children under trees, but offering no help.

At Chavakkacheri queues for a cup of plain-tea were about two hours long, while queues for bread, continually baked at a few bakeries, were about 5 hours long. A person was allowed only a pound loaf. The scarcity of food was such that a senior member of a family had to get up about 3.00 A.M. after sleeping late and join a bread queue 2 miles long. Later tokens were issued where a person would first queue up for a token in the morning, and later spend 2 hours in a bread queue. Matters were made worse by the non-availability of cash. The banks too were not functioning. Most people were thus in very desperate straits.

There was a good deal of suppressed anger among the people over what had been inflicted on them. It often burst out in a spontaneous unorganised manner. In one of those long bread queues in Chavakacheri one man blew up: "We are being treated as slaves. If this is their behaviour now, how would it be when we get Eelam?" Unlike in other times this was not greeted by others in fearful silence or with words of caution. But others joined in with the kind of sarcasm for which Jaffna is renowned. One shouted back, "Only those with knowledge must speak. Others must shut up." Another said, "Shut up or these fellows 'will land you one on the forehead'." Someone else added, "Watch it, they would stuff a frog down your throat." As this exchange was going on, the police arrived and ordered the first speaker to get into their vehicle. The man was vocal in his refusal. Finally he was dragged inside and the vehicle drove away.



During the course of these events, LTTE cadre needing medical care were removed from Jaffna. They, together with other patients from Jaffna hospital and others newly needing medical care, had all to be accommodated in the much smaller Chavakacheri base hospital. The beds were reserved for LTTE patients and others had to take the floor. Two senior LTTE men were heard sharing a joke: "Give two months and the people would forget all this".

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Developments in Jaffna

Even after the first phase of the exodus there were a large number of people in Jaffna who were determined to remain. An important consideration for them was the presence of the ICRC and the Jaffna hospital safety zone it controlled. In order to break this, the LTTE's strategy was to first apply pressure on the medical staff to move Jaffna hospital. When the news of the exodus order reached Jaffna hospital, pandemonium broke loose. The surgical team had a heavy schedule and was operating late. When they heard about the order, they walked out and sat down in the lounge, paralysed by shock. The LTTE had spread the word that the SL Army was coming

into the city from Mandaitivu, and that all the doctors had fled. A large number of patients, medical staff and a few junior doctors had fled the hospital to join the milling crowds choking Kandy Road. In many cases, the patients themselves or their relatives pulled out catheters and tubes connected to the body and left the hospital. (Some of them were admitted to Chavakacheri hospital, days later; but what happened to the rest of the patients is guesswork.) In the intensive Care Unit at Jaffna, one patient died of cardiac arrest as the nurses had fled. Nearly all LTTE injured that night were cleared by the LTTE medical team. But the senior staff at Jaffna hospital and a core of the others continued to remain and work as a team.

In the next few days as uncertainty continued in the hospital, several high-ranking LTTE men came there. When asked by individual doctors for clarification of the exodus order on the 30th, it was pointed out that the loudspeaker announcement had not claimed that it was the LTTE's.

Thamilcheelvan, the leader of the LTTE's political wing, addressed a meeting of the hospital doctors about 3rd November. It was clear that he was talking at two levels. At one level, the diplomatic level, he was very reassuring - the LTTE needed the hospital for some more days. He reiterated the position that the LTTE would respect the ICRC zone and the agreement concerning it. They would never, he said, force the closure of Jaffna hospital. But, at the other level, there were undertones suggesting that they would do the very opposite. One was his reference to never allowing the rival Tamil group EPDP to run a civil administration in Jaffna cited earlier. Another was a strongly stated aim that "they would never let go of their younger generation [from under their wings]". This meant that no family with children (i.e prospective recruits) would be allowed to live outside the control of the LTTE. He also said that if either side broke the ICRC zone agreement, which required 72 hours' notice, there would be no safe access to the outside world thereafter. Some of the doctors interpreted Thamilcheelvan's talk as giving in effect 72 hours' notice for the closure of Jaffna hospital, since this anticipated event had been very much in the air. The doctors raised questions and argued back. He was told, "You are going to revert back to guerilla warfare. But one day you hope to come back and run this place, and then the hospital would be necessary. Is it not therefore better for you to preserve this hospital?" Throughout the interview Thamilcheelvan remained smiling and seemed to be patient and attentive. Finally, he told them, "Do whatever the ICRC tells you."

The doctors were relieved. They thought that they had won their case. Thamilcheelvan had also been to see the ICRC. The following day, the whole picture was reversed, when they heard that the ICRC was considering pulling out and they would have to follow. The same day, a few concerned doctors went to see the ICRC. From what they gathered it appeared that Thamilcheelvan had persuaded the ICRC that everyone in Jaffna was leaving, so that there would be no reason for the ICRC to remain. One of the doctors asked the ICRC poignantly, "There are a hundred thousand people left in Jaffna. Are you going to leave them all and go away?" The ICRC representative responded with some alarm, "One hundred thousand? Or, do you mean one thousand?" The doctor replied, "One hundred thousand is correct." He explained the locations of the refugees in Valikamam, including those out of town, and said that nearly all of them intended staying. It was from this conversation that the doctors concluded that Thamilcheelvan had persuaded the ICRC that all the people were quitting.

The ICRC representative then explained that from what he had been told, the LTTE intended to mine all the access routes to their zone, in which event they would all be trapped. He then said sadly, "I might personally like to remain. But the head office in Geneva would probably order us to move." The doctors were crestfallen.

From the following day the ICRC prepared for the eventuality of moving out. The doctors were consulted about their preferences and lists were made of those who would work in Chavakacheri and Pt. Pedro. The Jaffna hospital zone had been patrolled by the ICRC and any LTTE cadre carrying arms within this zone was scolded and asked to move out. But after the LTTE had ordered the exodus, armed cadre were often seen in the safety zone. The ICRC told the doctors to be ready to move out on foot at short notice, adding to the alarm among civilians.

On 1st November the hospital had several hundred patients and staff. This number kept declining as even some serious patients quit. The talk got around the hospital that the LTTE was placing its cannon on the zonal boundary to fire at the army across the lagoon at Mandaitivu. Firing noises were also regularly heard within the hospital zone. The LTTE had ordered the shops in Jaffna to close. Although those in Jaffna had provisions, they had to cycle to Thenmaratchi for fruits and vegetables.

The LTTE's attitude towards the civilians too was becoming openly intimidatory. A large number of refugees were at John Bosco school next to the ICRC at the Temple Road-Rakka Road junction. The LTTE fired what are believed to have been fake shells at this camp. Shells were also fired near Ariyakulam and Pathirakali Amman temple, but no casualties were reported. The LTTE claimed that the shells were fired by the SL Army. But from the sound the people were certain that it was the LTTE. Near Kanthasamy Kovil some refugees were beaten by masked men. Sometimes masked persons went into private premises, pulled out knives, helped themselves to young coconuts and behaved in an intimidatory manner. About 2nd November the last of the refugees were forced out of the Medical Faculty of the University of Jaffna. [\[Top\]](#)

Last Scenes

At the time the LTTE made the expulsion order those remaining in Jaffna did so in the expectation that the SL Army would move in quickly. But this did not happen and things were comparatively quiet for a few days in early November.

These developments led to dissension among the civilians. Some felt it was better to leave soon while they could remove some of their moveable property, rather than wait for the last minute and lose everything if the LTTE chased them out. Once more the exodus picked up. Persons who had left Jaffna were prevented from returning by police sentries manning Navatkuli. Those coming to collect their things were given a day-pass until 4.00 p.m.. Overstaying was an offence. The road to Chavakacheri was regularly crowded with people removing their things. Some doctors visiting the bank observed, "The big guys have created an atmosphere of panic. The people are now moving".

LTTE cadre now sought out houses where the owners were still in occupation and set about targeting them for intimidation. Sometimes gun positions were mounted close by or rockets were fired. Those walking the roads were sometimes deliberately given a fright when a mortar shell landed close enough. A house was sometimes surrounded and the inmates asked to come out. They were told, "The army is coming to Jaffna because of Tamil traitors. We have received information that there is a traitor in this house. We will conduct a full search. Why would people want to remain in Jaffna when the army takes over, unless they are traitors?" Sometimes the householder had the presence of mind to throw back at the LTTE its pretence of legality, by insisting that the house could not be searched unless they came with a warrant from Thamilchelvan. Such efforts were of no avail. Search meant that contents of bags were spilt out and even women's items gone through one by one.

During early November there were periods of little discernible activity on the side of the Government forces. They were strangely silent. This was not what the LTTE wanted since it wanted the civilians to leave. The LTTE could be heard repeatedly firing into army controlled territory in a bid to provoke them, but with no response.

By 11th November harassment and sounds of LTTE firing inside town as well as noise from the intensity of fighting outside town reached a point where most remaining residents left their homes and went to schools and churches. During the early hours of 12th November the LTTE made a final bid to drive away the remaining civilians from town. About 2.00 a.m. the LTTE broke down the gates of Chudikuli Girls' College and barged in noisily. The refugees were ordered to assemble. Militant cadre barged into class rooms and dragged out sleeping refugees with no respect for age or sex. An infirm lady who was semi-blind was grabbed by the wrist and pulled off her bed, while her daughter screamed in protest.

Once assembled, following the usual harangue, the refugees were asked, "Those who want to remain when the SL Army comes in, raise your hands and give your names and addresses." No one spoke or protested. After sunrise the refugees dispersed to various churches. The LTTE was to bring lorries to transport those remaining. (From the time the LTTE started moving its things, it had commandeered all lorries belonging to Multi-Purpose Co-operative Societies.) Some clergymen accepted the LTTE's move to shift them with resignation. One said, "They want us to go. We have little choice." Some strong resistance appears to have been put up by the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission. It was reported that in a melee, a leading elder, an electrical engineer, had been pushed down and dragged by his feet into a lorry, thereby causing bruises to his body. The pastor of the Kandy Road church is said to have been hit on the shoulder resulting in a bad sprain that caused much swelling.

The principal of Chundikuli Girls' College was a cautious lady who had avoided confrontation with the LTTE, but had kept her reservations. The LTTE breaking into the school at 2.00 a.m. was the last straw. She told them, "I am leaving everything open and am going. Do what you like."

A number of clergy were among those assembled in a church. The LTTE asked them to leave and the clergy refused. The LTTE shot dead two dogs outside the church and warned those in the church that this may become their fate too. In some other places, those who refused to go had shots fired into the ground by their feet, resulting in pebbles flying up and injuring them.

Among those most bitter were persons who had built themselves up under LTTE rule and had developed a vested interest in its continuance. All of a sudden the bubble burst and their world had emptied. This was true of some of the church leaders, professionals, professors, traders and manufacturers. They cursed the LTTE as intensely as they had boosted it in the past. For all their flattery, the LTTE now indicated plainly that they counted for nothing. Some even said that the Sri Lankan Army was better than the LTTE.

A doctor had narrowly escaped the Welikade prison massacre in July 1983. He had lived in Jaffna, was the manager of a leading private boys' college, and the LTTE had been readily accessible to him. He had a number of animals and birds at home. In asking him to quit, out of deference to him, the LTTE offered him a car. The doctor indignantly turned it down. He, his wife and daughter mounted on three bicycles and moved out of Jaffna.

As the first two weeks of November wore on, the LTTE got about removing from houses things they regarded as valuable - furniture, electrical items, household items and roofing. Teams of boys worked like termites to gobble up houses in about two hours. What meant nothing to the organisation, namely books, documents and photographs collected over generations, were left abandoned in heaps for the wind, the rain and the termites.

Much of the equipment belonging to the University of Jaffna including microscopes and other laboratory apparatus were carted away to Palai and dumped in an open field which has been christened 'The Open University'. The Jaffna Hospital equipment and much of its asbestos roofing was also removed. Its supply of fuel and drugs too was carried away.

The scene at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Jaffna in Thinnevely about 12th November, left memories even more painful because of contrasting impressions. The Faculty had been completely ransacked and turned into a fortress and a nerve-centre for the final defence of Thinnevely. There were trenches across the roads in the locality to serve as tank traps. Sandbags were evident everywhere. Narrow trenches led to the boundary wall to accommodate defensive positions made up of stacked sandbags. There were also gun positions all over,

These first impressions took the minds of the visitors through the long and laborious years through which the institution was built by dedicated souls, some of whom are, thankfully, at rest. Those long hours of committee meetings, consultations with architects and contractors, trips abroad for recruitment and canvassing of staff and materials, hassles with the Government for funds and permission to import equipment - all this was to disappear in the twinkling of an eye, in a brief and futile military encounter. In other countries at war, armies kept away from monuments to the heritage of the people, and even as the enemy advanced, dedicated people remained in those institutions to protect them. Here in the name of liberation, the heritage of the people and of future generations was being sacrificed for transient military use.

The second impression was in sharp contrast to the first. The place was full of young LTTE cadre - boys about 16 or 17. Several of them were playing badminton. Others were cleaning themselves after a day's work, applying soap and bathing in leisurely fashion. The war seemed far away from these young boys. Did they realise that at this time the next day a number of them would be corpses or would be lying in hospital with their limbs blown off? How did they become caught up in this monstrous fate?

The experience was most painful for those with dependents who could not be moved. From many parts of Valikamam there were reports of elders heard screaming as those younger left them in their homes and joined the exodus. Several of those about to quit Jaffna on 13th November looked up their animals for what was probably to be the last time. Although the fighting and sounds of shelling were heavy, the SL Army was careful not to shell

Jaffna town. Cows about to calve and gazing helplessly had to be left to fend for themselves. Some forced to leave behind their dogs, walked miles to leave them in familiar surroundings. On that day the sound of shelling could be heard loudest in the northern precincts of Jaffna. Buildings were vibrating as though there was a giant earthquake. The dogs left behind were transfixed by fear or were running aimlessly only to find that one place was no better than the other. In most parts of Jaffna and surroundings there was an unbearable stench coming from animals starved to death and rotting on the roads. Those dogs that were alive, filled the air with their constant howling for their masters (themselves wailing) and because of the stench of death.

Society had become apathetic about very young children being tricked or dragooned into serving the LTTE leadership. Those close to the children cried in their homes. But otherwise there was little noise. Bishops, professors and religious gurus had talked and behaved as though this was the normal order of things. It was all sanitised. Yet, the terrified howls of creatures being deserted, against the continuous blasting of artillery shells, was something that wrenched the heart and pierced it with a recurring pain. The experience recalled to mind the lines of William Blake:

A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate

Predicts the ruin of the State.

A Horse misus'd upon the Road

Calls to Heaven for Human blood.

Each outcry of the hunted Hare

A fibre from the Brain does tear...

To those receding from the scene, these cries of agony seemed to translate into curses to be borne by the Tigers.

The last evacuees boarded the lorries. Passing Jaffna's deserted suburbs, and then the last habitations marked by fences, coconut trees and a broad stretch of Kandy Road, the travellers emerged into open space, the flooded fields of Ariyalai East on either side. Beneath the lowering sky, the road stretched out towards the Bo-tree junction, one and a half miles away, and beyond it over the dull blue waters of the lagoon and then the tree-lined horizon marking Navatkuli. It was a scene of desolation where the hands that channelled the waters and tended the fields were all fled. Only the winter birds whose yearly peregrinations had pre-dated mankind's labours were there. The evacuees spontaneously broke down crying. [\[Top\]](#)

The Closure of Jaffna Hospital

The final act in the closure of Jaffna Hospital is another of those painful episodes in the history of the Tamil people that deserves to be meditated upon with sympathy, trying to imagine oneself in the shoes of a handful of doctors and a few dozen individuals called upon to make agonising personal decisions. Apart from problems of medical ethics in such extreme situations as the country had not faced before, it also raises some questions about the role and obligations of the ICRC as an institution.

In the first few days that followed 30th October, the LTTE, as pointed out, had made its intentions clear. Soon after the announcement some surgical equipment went missing, and the authorities had to place some new locks. The LTTE was brazenly flouting the condition that no arms should be carried within the zone. From the first day the LTTE started removing stocks of medicine and the hospital generators one by one. Yet it continued to bring its injured cadre in for treatment.

The ICRC's conduct was also wobbly. It seemed to have accepted that the closure was inevitable and to have swallowed the LTTE's reading of the situation. This was that the patients, people and even medical staff were moving into Thenmaratchi and that soon there would be no work at the hospital. The senior doctors were however determined to keep the hospital open and to remain in Jaffna. In this they were supported by most of the

junior doctors and by medical staff who had not quit. The junior doctors even helped in menial tasks such as cooking, and they all worked as a team. The ICRC's attitude however indicated that it wanted to move. As the doctors understood it, Thamilselvan had 'really scared the daylights' out of the ICRC by threatening to cut off access. Worse still, a shell fell near the ICRC office, a shell whose source is disputed. The general opinion among the people was that it was an LTTE shell. Others however maintained that it was an SL Army shell on the grounds that the explosion was louder than that obtaining from LTTE shells. But given that the area was not subject to general shelling by the SL Army, it would appear strange that the army from 3 or 4 miles away should aim a single shell at the location of the ICRC office.

From about 7th November the ICRC started taking down their flags and insignia, heralding the closure and spreading panic among all those who had depended on the ICRC zone for their protection. The doctors at the hospital and the ICRC seemed to be working towards different ends and the communication gap was quite evident. Mr. Georg Cunz, the head of the ICRC mission was guarded and diplomatic in what he said. But remarks attributed to the ICRC team as a whole gave doctors the feeling that they were very much misunderstood and that the ICRC team was more influenced by what the LTTE told them than by the ground situation in the hospital. Of course no one could take the LTTE's reputation lightly and there was the shell near the ICRC office of unknown provenance.

The ICRC opened a mobile clinic with Jaffna Hospital doctors in Thenmaratchi and the medical doctor of the ICRC team was constantly comparing statistics between Jaffna Hospital and Chavakacheri Hospital. A member of the Jaffna Hospital surgical team took a breather from a grinding routine by standing on the balcony of the house officers' quarters. The ICRC nurse who passed by below addressed a remark to him, "There are lots of casualties in the ward, why are you idling?". There was a regular insinuation attributed to the ICRC that the hospital doctors were shirkers. By the time the ICRC started pulling down their flags, the doctors came to know of remarks from the ICRC team to the effect, "Why are the doctors drinking tea [here in Jaffna hospital] and wasting their time [when there is so much work elsewhere]?" The ICRC seemed unable to see the value the native folk and the doctors attached to Jaffna Hospital as a key community institution that had to be preserved despite temporary setbacks.

The LTTE was at the same time working hard at different levels to close down Jaffna Hospital. There was a great deal of individual canvassing of patients, staff and doctors by others sympathetic to the LTTE. Their fears were constantly played upon. But the senior doctors and a core of junior doctors and medical staff worked as a team and stood firm in their resolve to keep the hospital functioning. The LTTE had always feared any showing of community spirit and cohesiveness that was outside its direct control.

The LTTE used some of what is known in military parlance as 'softening up', before the final coup de grace in the form of a carrot. There was intimidation in the form of remarks. An LTTE patient who was receiving treatment, for example, addressed a remark to a nurse, "Why are the doctors waiting here without going? We have marked who the traitors are. We know how to deal with them!" A very worried nurse communicated this to the doctors.

On the 100th of November, 11 days after the exodus order, there were 300 patients in the hospital with a little more than 1000 beds, providing more than enough work for the staff who remained. Many of them were elderly patients, seriously ill paediatric patients and women who had undergone caesarian operations. LTTE agents came in vehicles and made a determined bid to get the patients out. Intense pressure was applied on the patients and their relatives and what went on was more or less public. As soon as someone gave-in to pressure, someone, in most cases the relative, simply pulled out the naso-gastric tubes or the IV (intravenous) drips. The patient was then loaded onto a stretcher and driven away to Chavakacheri. In the meantime the LTTE had told the ICRC that there were no patients in the hospital.

The battle was simultaneously joined in by some of the doctors. While on one side the LTTE was asking patients to go, the doctors went around reassuring the patients that they would be around and that there was no need to leave. Within a few hours, however, the bulk of the patients had been carried away. Some of the doctors asked the ICRC to station one person permanently in the hospital so that they could see for themselves what was going on. The ICRC representative replied that there were no patients in the hospital. The doctors went in for a quick count and told the ICRC that there were 30 patients! the ICRC representative then promised to send someone around regularly to take a look.

On the following morning or the one after (12th), Thamichelvan came to deliver the final thrust. He used the well-tried method of a totalitarian force. Having constantly rattled the nerves of the defenders of Jaffna hospital and built up fear, he offered a carrot to a chosen few whom he judged to be vulnerable and were key to the continuance of the hospital. It was a gamble that paid off. Had it failed, it would have increased resistance, creating more problems for the LTTE. Thamichelvan met a closed group comprising a few hospital consultants and offered their families passes to go to Colombo, including their teen-aged children who are normally not eligible for passes. The consultants accepted. Thamichelvan left after promising to collect a list of names that evening and issue the passes. A way out of the draconian pass system had become a lure that few could resist.

Immediately afterwards the hospital staff met. One of the consultants who had accepted Thamichelvan's offer represented the position slightly differently. He told them that all the hospital staff were offered passes for their families. He said that all who wanted passes could include their names in the list that Thamichelvan would collect in the evening. But the nurses and other staff had already heard that only the consultants were included in the offer. Some of them asked, crestfallen, "Then how about us?" It was a severe blow to the junior doctors who along with the remaining junior staff, had totally trusted their seniors and had given themselves entirely to working as a team. The hospital superintendent was also offended that those who had agreed to Thamichelvan had never consulted her in the matter. The consultants were urged to reconsider. At the meeting at 3.00 P.M that day, the majority of the consultants voted to accept Thamichelvan's deal. The fate of the hospital was sealed. The ICRC was told of the decision to move the hospital. Mr. Cunz's face, it is reported, brightened with plain relief. The evacuation of Jaffna hospital was fixed for the 14th.

It was also evident that Thamichelvan's attitude to the doctors changed after the consultants fell for his offer. He seemed to have lost respect, particularly towards those advocating his offer. He never came to collect the list of names and avoided the doctors thereafter. For several of those who had agreed, the obtaining of passes became a long drawn out harassing affair. The blow was also keenly felt by those who had remained in Jaffna drawing strength from the hospital. The methods used to expel civilians became decisively harsh following the LTTE's success in closing the hospital. The doctors themselves had drawn comfort from the decision of the Roman Catholic Bishop in Jaffna to remain. Despite pressure and several visits from the LTTE, he and the bulk of the clergy were firmly resolved to remain. The Bishop made a trip to Colombo in connection with two of his clergy detained for questioning in Colombo. By the time he returned to peninsular Jaffna the situation had changed. Following LTTE harassment and shelling (in which no one was injured) around St. Patrick's, an area having several key Catholic institutions, the bulk of the orders of clergy and nuns had quit, along with most of the people who took refuge in these institutions. The Bishop too then kept out of Valikamam.

A comic event took place on the 13th when the LTTE sent vehicles to evacuate the remaining civilians, which also showed how some of the young cadre innocently carried out their order to clean up the city. A cadre stopped his bus outside the hospital, sounded his horn, and shouted out to the lady superintendent standing in front, "Get in madam, this is the last bus out of Jaffna. If you miss this one, you will never get another one!"

The exodus of the hospital to Pt. Pedro was arranged by the ICRC with meticulous care. But once there, the ICRC appeared to wash its hands off the Jaffna hospital. The hospital staff had looked upon the ICRC in some sense as a guarantor of their security and this had influenced their decision to stay on till the last. Since security reasons were among those compelling the movement of the hospital, the staff felt that they should be moved to a place that was at least safe. This was not the case with Pt. Pedro which was subject to shelling by the SL Army and there was no officially accepted security zone around the hospital there. Doctors applied to the ICRC for transport on their ship that sailed regularly between Pt. Pedro and Trincomalee. This was at first refused. Mr. Cunz later suggested that if those wanting transport write jointly to the Ministry of Defence in Colombo and obtain their sanction, the ICRC would transport them. Such a letter was given to the ICRC for forwarding. It was later reliably learnt that the letter stopped with the ICRC office in Colombo, and was not forwarded. The ICRC in Pt. Pedro, however, told them that the defence ministry had refused permission. On the other hand it seemed to them that the Government which wanted to reopen Jaffna Hospital would like to get them down to Colombo, since from Colombo, the Government would have better control over the doctors than when they remained in Tiger territory. Further, whereas the LTTE would want to keep doctors under their control, the ICRC too, it appeared, was playing a game of delicate balancing between the two armed forces it had to work with. In actual fact, the major actors were acting in such a manner where the people were being hemmed into smaller and smaller areas and were being used as pawns in a game. The ICRC also contributed to this by refusing to open a

safe passage to the people out of this contracting circle. Its ships regularly returned to Trincomalee almost empty.

The ICRC had rendered invaluable service to the community by ensuring the continued security and functioning of Jaffna Hospital for more than 5 years. It has acted as a commonly trusted intermediary in peace moves and arranged exchanges of prisoners and visits to them. It has also served as a foreign presence witnessing the plight of ordinary people. However, the ICRC has the practice of changing delegates every 6 months. Staff whose experience had just enabled them to understand the intricacies of the situation are changed. Several of the delegates had proven their worth, standing firm for the hospital. But during the recent crisis, the individual delegates proved to be only too human, like the Jaffna doctors. [\[Top\]](#)

Vadamaratchi

The last evacuees went to Chavakacheri, Killinochchi and the majority to Vadamaratchi. Many of those who went to Killinochchi hoped to find their way to Colombo. Vadamaratchi was less crowded than Chavakacheri, and bread was more easily available since there were more bakeries. Even here there were queues and, like elsewhere in Jaffna, cash too was hardly available. Friends and well-wishers helped those who arrived in Vadamaratchi to find rooms in Pt Pedro. But here there were constant reminders of the war in the form of shelling. A few days later, on 14th November, a long convoy of vehicles with ICRC flags, preceded by motorcycle outriders reached Pt Pedro. This was the final evacuation of the ICRC along with Jaffna hospital. For a few more days lorries and bullock carts continued to go to Jaffna to fetch the properties of institutions and private belongings. But most people left behind everything. The banks too had moved to Pt. Pedro with whatever records they could carry. But their coffers were empty. The Government also placed severe restrictions on the carrying of cash into Jaffna; even institutions were refused permission by the Ministry of Defence to take cash for salary payments. Each individual going north was restricted to Rs 5000/-. Thus people and institutions like orphanages were placed in a position where they could neither operate their local bank accounts nor get cash from Colombo.

Withdrawals from banks were restricted to Rs 500/-. While the Government restricted the flow of cash, the LTTE, which received priority in withdrawing its huge cash deposits from the banks, had plenty of cash. It had also been insisting on cash payments for its National Defence Fund contributions. As the exhausted refugees poured into Vadamaratchi, the LTTE's NDF collections from Vadamaratchi folk went into top gear. Those who were desperate for cash had to part with their gold to the LTTE for a ridiculously low price. The LTTE capitalised on the suffering of the people in various ways. For example, the proprietor of the Milk White soap company wanted a pass to go into Jaffna and collect his stock of soap from the stores. The LTTE agreed on condition that they would be given half the stock. Soap was being sold under LTTE monopoly for the astronomical price of Rs 70 a cake.

Within limits the LTTE had striven to keep the elite on its side. As Pt. Pedro became crowded with refugees, the LTTE got about looking for houses for the elite. Several refugees who had just found shelter and settled down, found themselves virtually getting thrown out on the streets with bag and baggage after being promised alternative accommodation. The only consolation they found was in tears, until some good soul came along to help.

The LTTE press, radio and loudspeakers constantly advised people to move to the Vanni. Fear also got around that a second exodus from Thenmaratchi and Vadamaratchi into the Vanni would be enforced. The LTTE was providing free transport across the Jaffna lagoon to the mainland, but was not in general permitting movement into Jaffna - i.e., a one-way passage was on offer.

In this situation several people decided that rather than remain with the LTTE and get trapped, it would be better to go to Colombo while they could return to Jaffna when the situation improves. Long queues gathered outside pass offices. About 17th November, the LTTE closed its pass offices and stopped issuing passes. Several of the offices were stoned by frustrated crowds. [\[Top\]](#)

Killinochchi and Vanni

Amidst the trauma and disorder of being thrown out of Jaffna, there were just three matters in which normality quickly returned. First, in the matter of recruitment. Displaced people entering Navatkuli were greeted with messages on banners with a yellow background at regular intervals. Young men and women were urged to join the LTTE to liberate Jaffna and were told that there was a recruitment office nearby at their service. A meeting of the Jaffna University Students Union was called at Chavakacheri. This was not to discuss education or the future of the University. The matter was simply this. After perhaps 6 or 7 years of trying to get a degree there was virtually no university. The South was essentially hostile and was not going to accommodate them. They were on the roads with nowhere to go. Likewise with high school students who were geared to advancement through education. The LTTE had precipitated a situation where there was to be no school in the foreseeable future. Thousands of 16 or 17 year olds who had worked very hard in difficult conditions for their G.C.E.O.level examinations in December felt hopeless and desperate when the examinations had to be cancelled. The message now was: Join us, the LTTE, and with greater numbers we would get the separate state of Eelam quickly. Then you could go back to whatever you want to do. Otherwise you will rot on the roads for years." If the number of university students joining the LTTE was negligible in the past, it was now significantly higher. For some months now it has been fairly common for LTTE cadre to tell young boys that if they did not join the LTTE now, they would be conscripted later. This message was often heard by the young fleeing through Thenmaratchi and the Vanni.

The second aspect of normality is in the collection of taxes. In the areas where the refugees have been dispersed, the tax collectors have returned to work very efficiently. Goods sold are taxed and collections to the National Defence Fund are going on. At the beginning payment to this fund was a requirement to cross the lagoon of those wanting to go to Colombo (This appears to have been relaxed when the LTTE decided to move as many as were willing across the lagoon into Killinochchi). The Tiger greed for gold also quickly surfaced. It has been decreed that only the LTTE could purchase gold. The price initially offered at Rs.3000 per sovereign was about 50% to 60% of the market rate. There are also restrictions on the carrying of jewellery by those leaving the North. By comparison, the Muslims the LTTE chased out of Jaffna in 1990 had to surrender all their valuables. Women then were subject to humiliating body searches with sometimes ear-rings being plucked off bleeding ears - all by women cadre. The recent extortion exercise was observed with suppressed anger by people who had parted with their cash-in-hand to meet their payment to the LTTE and were the next day thrown out of Jaffna with nothing in hand. Owing to the monopoly the LTTE had enforced, later reports said that gold had been sold for much less than 3,000 rupees a sovereign by people desperate for cash.

Thirdly, new pass offices were quickly established after the computers originally from the University were relocated. A new centre was established in Kodikamam. The elderly wanting to go to Colombo had little difficulty. Children were almost always refused. For a short time the minimum age for refusal was raised from 10 to 14 and has since dropped to 12. The maximum age is 30. Moreover, the LTTE was not too keen on restraining middle class persons who feel they have alternatives, such as going abroad, and hence would be a nuisance to the LTTE in the Vanni. On the other hand such persons had in general proved very useful abroad. But this leniency ended after a short time, when the issuing of passes was stopped.

Those crossing the lagoon into Killinochchi found things much better organised for long term recruitment and settlement. By contrast the LTTE had done nothing or very little to cater to long term civilian welfare in Thenmaratchi and Vadamatchi. Those crossing the lagoon and landing at Alankerni on the mainland were offered plain-tea by courtesy of Tamil Eelam Boat Service and the Tamil Eelam Administrative Service. Then came the usual tractor ride to Nallur and a free but jam-packed lorry ride to Killinochchi. There, shelter was provided in schools, with school teachers, boy-scouts, and cubs providing supervision and free food. They were later taken to shelters from where vehicles proceeded to different locations in the Vanni. By the 9th of November UNHCR lorries were seen in Killinochchi suggesting that food sent by the Government had begun to come in. Refugees going to villages in the Vanni were given free food for two days. Within that time they were enabled to register with the local headman and start receiving government rations. They were then given land, mammothies, and other agricultural implements to begin cultivation. The Tamil Refugees' Organization (TRO), an NGO started by the LTTE, was at the fore-front of this activity and is responsible for Vadamatchi, Thenmaratchi and Vanni. Formerly, all NGOs were registered as part of the NGO Forum, giving an illusion of partnership and democratic functioning. The illusion is no longer there with the TRO openly calling the shots. All other international NGOs

have to work through the TRO, thereby giving the impression that it was the LTTE that was their benefactor. The bulk of the resources at its command come from the government machinery and other NGOs. All this suggests that the LTTE had put considerable effort into this and had long-term plans for the displaced people. It would also appear that the LTTE wishes to empty the population of Jaffna into Vanni.

Some of the international NGOs had protested to the TRO of the LTTE's control in refugee camps being used to recruit minors. At least to these NGOs, the TRO has acknowledged that the recruitment of minors is wrong. The matter no doubt ends there. Initially there was a great deal of anger against the LTTE among displaced persons thrown into chaotic conditions in the Vanni. The TRO has tried hard to soothe the anger and bring some order.

By early December, the LTTE had ordered the TRO to stop work in Thenmaratchi so as to apply pressure on the population to move to the Vanni. This led to dissatisfaction among relief workers who had been working hard. International NGOs are worried. Following the exodus order, they reluctantly moved out of Jaffna into Thenmaratchi and Vadamaratchi. They had decided that they would not move again. Should the LTTE engineer a second exodus into the Vanni from the remainder of the peninsula, these NGOs are apparently not quite sure what they would do.

As November wore on, several of those wanting to take to Colombo their children to whom the age restriction applied, did so by paying sums of up to Rs 1 lakh at the Thandikulam crossing point. Others who came to Thandikulam without passes paid sums of money from Rs 10,000 upwards after negotiation and were allowed to pass over to Vavuniya. Once the LTTE stopped issuing passes, there were also scenes at Thandikulam, where for example A-Level boys threw stones at the pass office. In some places, the LTTE opened the pass office for a short time and issued a few passes to calm the unrest and then closed it again. From mid-November travellers reported signs of discontent among some LTTE cadre they met. Some complained that the big ones were not to be found and they were at a loose end. Not everything went smoothly for the LTTE in the Vanni. It had to find housing for a large number of its supporters who had come over. This was causing some heart-burn. The editor of the 'Eelanatham', the LTTE's paper, whose wife is from an upper middle class background, was said to be dissatisfied with the house he had been assigned in Uruthirapuram. [\[Top\]](#)

The Government in Peace and War

Looking at the events over the last year, it would appear that during the peace process the Government was not clear about the nature of the LTTE. Moreover, during war it lacked clarity and consistency in its approach to the Tamil people, whom, it said, it sought to win over politically. One of its marked achievements is however the peace package announced at the end of July, laying down the outlines of a political settlement. During the peace process the Government paid little attention to the complications arising from the nature of the LTTE. Having consulted the Tamil elite in Colombo and those abroad, the Foreign Minister, who had no grass-roots contact, maintained confidently that the Tamil people supported the Government's efforts for peace with the LTTE. These were ultimately noises modulated by the LTTE and kept changing with the LTTE's strategic considerations. Once the war was precipitated the Government and the foreign office became hostile to NGO and other voices which tried to represent the people who were victims of military measures.

In both these phases there has been a notable lack of conception regarding the place and interests of the ordinary Tamil people. The manner in which the current war is being conducted has shown little respect for the civilians as people whom the Government is trying to win over. With the exception of Jaffna town and suburbs, bombing and shelling in other areas appears to have been untargetted and done in the way of reprisals. It was pointed out earlier that most of the hundred civilian deaths during October occurred as the result of bombing and shelling well outside the combat zone. Vadamaratchi and Thenmaratchi had been regularly shelled during the month of November and these are areas to which displaced people have moved in large numbers. Shelling of these areas had notably taken place during times when fighting was heavy and the army sustained casualties-i.e., shelling had been frequent from about 10th to 14th November.

Two civilians were killed in the Mattuvil area in Thenmaratchi on the 10th. On 11th November a refugee child was killed when shells fell in Maruvan Pulavu, Thenmaratchi, on the Kerativu road. Two were killed in Kaithadi, Thenmaratchi, on the 12th. On the same day one civilian was killed near Thikkam in Valvettithurai. Many more

were injured in all these incidents. During the 13th night a total of about 40 shells were accounted by civilians to have fallen in several parts of Vadamaratchi, most of them on the coast or into the sea. Only one shell is known to have fallen on or near an LTTE women's camp in the Mattuivil-Nunavil area killing a female and injuring two others. The LTTE later claimed that they had apprehended a woman spy with a walkie talkie! On 21st November the air force dropped bombs in the Mullaitivu area. In Nedunkerni 4 persons from three families were killed and 15 were injured. At Kachilamadu 5 members of a single family were killed. Some of the injured are receiving treatment in Vavuniya. In the Navatkuli-Kaithady area bombs were dropped near a refugee camp - no reports of casualties. Such indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas helps to negate in the minds of ordinary people the apparent pains taken to ensure good behaviour of advancing troops.

The same lack of clear conception of civilian welfare also applies to the banning of travel through Jaffna lagoon. If it is done for a short term purpose, the civilians should be told so. As it is, this threatens to become another fiasco like what happened under the UNP government. For the lack of an alternative passage Tamil civilians travelled through Jaffna lagoon for three years under fire from the navy and the air force. Well over a hundred civilian lives were lost. In one incident in early January 1993, 30 to 60 civilians were massacred with knives and guns by the Sri Lankan Navy who boarded some of the boats. Those who lost their lives included government servants who were required to go to Colombo to transact government business.

Also unfortunate is the choice of some of the officers leading the offensive. One of them, Brig. Karunatilake, was in charge of the brigade at Valaichenai that was responsible for the notorious Eastern University disappearances during September 1990. There are also cases being taken up against him pertaining to his earlier activity during the JVP insurgency. This again shows a certain lack of concern about civilian welfare and civilian sensibilities.

The relative care shown in not shelling or bombing Jaffna town suggests that the operation had been discussed with the more influential sections of the diplomatic community in Colombo and that some agreement was reached (One shell had fallen within the ICRC zone, in front of the surgeon's house. The bombing in Ariyalai East has been referred to already. Several shells fired from Mandaitivu fell about the Gurunagar coast). The Government itself fails to have appreciated its strong position in this respect. Having scored a success in influencing the UN Secretary General to make a statement, the LTTE propaganda failed thereafter. There were two main reasons for this.

Foreign journalists covering the war were told by foreign diplomats and some of the international NGOs that the government forces had been careful to avoid civilian casualties, with the exception of about two lapses. The latter seemed to refer to the bombing of Ariyalai East on the 26th October and the two shells in Gurunagar on the 29th, suggesting again that they were looking almost exclusively at the town area. The bombing and shelling elsewhere does not seem to have featured significantly in their thinking. To this extent the army and air force had been careful. On the other hand they seem to have had the license to vent their anger anywhere, but sparing Jaffna town where the refugees were once supposed to gather. This may satisfy foreigners, but it is far from being a satisfactory approach towards the Tamil people who are citizens of this country.

The second reason for the failure of the LTTE's propaganda blitz was that its claims were found wanting in two respects. Although the LTTE under-estimated its own power to force an exodus from Jaffna, the resistance of those who remained had to be overcome by force and terror. (An LTTE functionary later confided privately that they had under-estimated the panic that would result from the announcement of the exodus order.) Despite the use of terror it took the LTTE 16 days to throw out those who remained and the truth came out very soon. The figure of 500,000 refugees claimed for the exodus too raised scepticism. It turned out that the Government Agent was quoting NGOs and the NGOs were quoting the government administration that was under the GA. A figure of 300,000 may have been more realistic since a steady exodus had been taking place for 5 years. Moreover, the LTTE's conduct over the years had made the foreign media far less sympathetic. Its spokesmen too cut little ice with the foreign media.

Very damaging to the LTTE and the Tamil people had been the massacre of a hundred Sinhalese civilians in the East. Had the LTTE not done this, the 100 or so Tamil civilians killed during October would have aroused greater concern. As it was, it appeared as collateral damage that was light by the standards of other wars. A veteran correspondent experienced in Vietnam and Cambodia remarked, "I hate to be the father of one of those killed. But look, what is a hundred civilians dead given the heavy fighting involved?" The indications are that the death among combatants was about 1500 over the same period.

Our questions are however not based on numerical considerations, but rather on the politics behind the civilian deaths. The death of even this relatively small number of civilians cannot be attributed to collateral damage. It was mainly callousness. Whether the number killed by the random shelling in Vadamaratchi and Thenmaratchi is 2, 20 or 200 is not the question. The question is about whether the Government should bomb or shell civilians at all in the manner it had done? What is the politics behind such actions? Can it bring peace? Can it reconcile the Tamils to accept living in a united Sri Lanka? These are long term questions that go beyond numbers.

It is in the same vein that we have questioned the LTTE's politics. What it represents is not determined so much by the number of Tamil dissidents tortured and killed, or the numbers of Muslim and Sinhalese civilians massacred, but rather that these killings and massacres are integral to its workings as an institution and have frightening implications. We need to use a different yardstick from foreign observers because these are all our own problems and an indication of the callous attitude towards people in general that is part of the Tamil nationalist legacy.

Looking at events over the weeks, it was remarkable how much the government and the LTTE were playing identical games with the people and actually reinforcing each other's actions. Both parties seemed most at ease in extreme polarised positions, found in a state of confrontation and war. The government through restrictions starved the people of cash. The LTTE did the same by withdrawing its cash deposits from the banks and collecting for the National Defence Fund. It then reaped thumping profits by exchanging cash for gold with desperate civilians on highly advantageous terms. When the LTTE wanted to expel the civilians from Jaffna, it looked to the government for some help in the form of shelling civilians. But early November witnessed a lull in SL army shelling. The LTTE had to go through the embarrassment of firing its own shells and getting caught.

Now in Vaadamaratchi and Thenmaratchi, the game is more complex. The LTTE wants the people to move to the Vanni, but appears to be hampered both by international opinion and the tougher nature of the people in Vadamaratchi in engineering a second exodus without help from the SL Army. The government appears to have no clear policy. The army, it seemed, had acquired a taste for taking over an area without the inconvenience of having civilians around. It would be more convenient for the government if the LTTE could be blamed for chasing the civilians out. Following its capture of Jaffna, the army continued to shell Vadamaratchi and Thenmaratchi, but not heavily. In mid-December, however, the army announced a heavy artillery barrage against LTTE targets in Vadamaratchi, claiming that it was to prevent LTTE infiltration into Valikamam. Based on past experience, one could have no illusions on what this means to the civilians. This made the censorship then prevailing even more inexcusable.

How does the ordinary Tamil civilian see the government through all this? He experienced bombing and shelling around Jaffna. But once the LTTE drove him out, and made him a vagrant, his anger turned against the LTTE. In Vadamaratchi or Thenmaratchi, he again experienced shelling. He underwent privations because the government was made to appear responsible for starving him of cash and other necessities. He came to Vavuniya to proceed to Colombo. He had to undergo the humiliation of being herded and confined to a camp for three days by the government. He came to Colombo to experience police harassment and fear. All around him people were saying that it felt rather like July 1983. By this time, many in his position would have concluded that the LTTE is something in the nature of a necessary evil, that is the only check on the communalism of successive governments.

The celebration of the state for the fall of Jaffna and the general treatment of Tamil civilians in the South which followed the exodus again raised the important question of what the Tamils can expect from the government in the face of rising buoyancy among extreme Sinhalese. If there is no change of heart but a mere continuation of the same state machinery and polarised attitudes, the Tamils will only be pushed further into the arms of the Tigers leaving only the prospect of continuing divisive conflict, destruction and war in the coming years.

The government needs to be far less cynical and do much better if it wants to involve the Tamils in a political process of reconciliation that in the long term will help the whole country to get out of this vicious cycle of destruction.

It must be borne in mind that even this government has been guilty of war crimes. We quote from a recent publication titled "Post-Traumatic Responses to Aerial Bombing" by a medical doctor to appear in "Social Science and Medicine"(UK): **"In addition to detention, torture and displacement, bombing [and shelling] is one of major stressors of the war. It would appear that in many instances, bombings are used primarily as psychological weapons against civilians, for their ability to accurately hit military targets within densely populated areas is exceptional, as seen in the war in Sri Lanka where the sophistication of instruments is low. At the same time, the guerillas have consistently sought civilian cover, thereby drawing fire on to the general public. The usually sudden, unexpected and unpredictable nature, the blast and noise of the explosion giving rise to what was called 'shell-shock' in World War I; and the massive destruction, injuries and death that follow are dimensions of stress ...Thus the variety of symptoms and even the cluster of more severe symptoms amounting to a psychiatric disorder in some individuals had been accepted as an inevitable part of the war situation. It could also be true that many of the responses to a traumatic experience are manifestations of an organism's attempt to cope or adapt in an abnormal situation. Obviously what is abnormal is the bombing itself and not the reactions to it. Lifton had stressed that it is important not to delegitimise the suffering of the victims by assigning a psychiatric label. Bombing of civilians should be considered a grave offence - a war crime."** [\[Top\]](#)

The Elite, the People & Illusions

The elite are nearly always atomised individuals whose confidence and reassurance come from their association with institutions, whether the state, commercial institutions, religious and educational institutions or NGOs. In the present world all these have ramifications in the global power structure. It is power that they respect and power relations they understand best. In the event of a phenomenon like the LTTE which jars their complacency, it is natural for them to approach the problem in terms of co-opting it into power structures. But such attempts to deal with a phenomenon such as the LTTE, the total thrust of whose actions is entirely contrary to the well-being of people, further corners the people and inflicts enormous suffering on them.

Thus from an elitist point-of-view, the human rights violations of the Tigers, their eliminations and their virtual conscription of children were largely non-issues. The blood and spirit was taken out of these violations and they were sanitised and explained away in such allegorical terms as painful and curative reactions, necessary side effects to combating state terrorism. There was a persistent refusal to see its ultimate destructiveness towards its own community in the long term.

Among these illusions held by the elite is that of rationality. Morality was of little significance in their world-view as appears the norm in international relations. There was an expectation of being able to deal with the LTTE rationally. This was largely the approach of the various peace missions, both foreign and Southern. A confidence was expressed from within the Government negotiating team that the LTTE leaders now reaching middle age and not far from old age would like to settle down. The 40 year-old LTTE leader's son's being sent to an elite mission school was deemed a healthy sign. In other words they understood each other, or so it seemed.

There was such confidence also among the Tamil elite whose position had become morally compromised. They had a contempt for those who raised questions of human rights and morality and suffered for it. They believed that they were doing the rational thing that was the need of the hour. Whatever compromise they made, they argued, it was to keep institutions going and to preserve the foundations for the future. What was happening to the people for whom these institutions existed was lost sight of. Even sections of some of the churches plummeted to their lowest depths.

Both the elite and the LTTE sustained these illusions and built vested interests around them. The edifices - underground facilities, hospitals, impressive buildings for administrative divisions and public relations, parks, tombs and mausolea - the LTTE built in the Neervely, Urumpirai and Kondavil areas which fell to the government forces within a month are a testimony to the magnitude of the illusion. The breaking of the bubble so irked the LTTE that it decided that if it could not have Jaffna, no one could have it, not even the people to whom it belonged.

The elite who thought they had the LTTE in a relation of partnership discovered overnight that they did not matter a hoot to the LTTE. They were thrown out of Jaffna along with the ordinary people and the institutions which they

sought to preserve ceased to exist. The nation was on the roads, rain and all. But they were so cornered that even at this juncture they could not move to represent the concerns of the people. Although privately expressing bitterness against the LTTE, publicly they signed petitions to the international community blaming it all on the Government. Although the relatively low death toll and the recent massacres of Sinhalese diluted their case, expressions were used giving the sense that the Government of Sri Lanka which had killed thousands of Tamil civilians [in the past], was now [through forcing them out of Jaffna under conditions of inclement weather and utter want], finally destroying them through mental trauma and physical hardship. The constant theme in these statements was the claim that the Government was subjecting the Tamil people to genocide.

Yet the voices of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people that were not heard and are not meant to be heard, carried no sophistry and no illusions. Forced in the night and under heavy rain, on 30th October, to trudge through the flooded moorlands of Chemmani and Kaithady, one clear refrain was readily heard and assented to: "This is happening to us today because we did it to the Muslims exactly five years ago." Some recalled that they were given 4 hours to vacate, while the Muslims were given two. The common people's sense of justice had remained clear and unambiguous. A recent evacuee from Jaffna asked: "I know even school boys who had got together and told the LTTE recruiters coming to their schools that they would not join, because 'those who live by the sword will die by the sword'. If school boys could do that much, why cannot our religious and community leaders do more?" [\[Top\]](#)

The Cost of the Exodus

The one defence of the enforced exodus that is also advocated by the LTTE statement quoted earlier is that it saved human lives, in view of the looming military confrontation. However, temporary displacement from directly endangered areas could have been best left to the judgement of the people who are themselves well experienced in such matters. Even if the claim to saving lives is valid, it is so only in the context of the perverse nature of the LTTE's insistence of turning Jaffna into a battle zone and the paralysis it has brought on the civil society. Having decided on reverting to guerilla warfare, if it had concern for the people, it had no reason to bring death and destruction on the people and their institutions by confronting an army in the city for the second time in eight years. (Many national armies avoid confronting an invading army in cities for the sake of the people and to protect their cultural treasures and institutions.) If there was moreover a functioning civil society with teachers, professionals and religious leaders who could voice the concerns of the people independently, their demands would have had a global audience. Then pressure would have been brought to bear and their security far better ensured with the ICRC playing a more active and positive role. The Government would not have got away with the kind of bombing and shelling it has indulged in. Instead of credible voices on behalf of the people, we have statements from bishops, vicars-general and academics that are so one-sided that no one takes them seriously except expatriate Tamil nationalists.

The roots of the exodus must be sought in the character of the LTTE's politics, its unchanging agenda of totalitarian power, its absence of concern for the people, and its duplicity resulting from a historical inability to negotiate as part of a political process.

It must also be pointed out that the physical death toll from the exodus is high, beginning with a dozen or two who died in the same night as the direct result of conditions in the march. We do not exactly know how many patients shifted from the hospital died as a result, or how many sickly persons succumbed (some conservative estimates have been given at the beginning of this report, based on available information). Moreover, tens of thousands of animals succumbed to an agonising death through starvation.

Death from disease arising as a direct consequence of the exodus is certainly high. Approximately ten persons from Thenmaratchi and 5 persons from Vadamaratchi were dying daily as the result of malnutrition, debility, weakness and diarrhoea that were endemic among the displaced children. This alone would make the LTTE claim of life-saving very dubious. There was also the accidental explosion of an ammunition truck in Chavakacheri during November which was then crowded with refugees. According to medical authorities, thirty six, including 14 civilians, were killed and many others injured. Such hazards were greatly increased by the exodus.

What is perhaps the key point here is that physical death that is readily recognisable is just one way of ceasing to be. Other forms of death that are at least as serious are far less easily recognised. In this second manner, the

community has suffered grievously and, perhaps, permanently. Each man or woman is organically linked by deeply felt bonds to his or her home, the soil, the environment, the domestic animals, educational institutions, and to institutions of culture and religion. It is for this reason that the Muslims forced out of Jaffna five years ago have resisted resettlement elsewhere and still want to come back; it is not merely for a small plot of dry land and the walls of a looted home. These institutions are the lifeblood of the community, built through generations of labour, and represent an extension of the life of those long gone.

This second form of death is evident in various degrees among those forced out of Jaffna. The conditions and rigours of the march made people feel humiliated and robbed them of their self-esteem. They also lost their sense of identity as their homes, schools and the university ceased to be and they became vagrants and beggars on the streets.

Many who were part of the exodus described in dramatic detail the stages by which they were destroyed as persons and members of a community. In the milling crowd each person high or low was a nobody. No one cared about women, children or the sick. It was a struggle to take just one step in several minutes. Each move hurt or toppled someone else. Everyone was a curse to his or her neighbour. Everyone was scarred by the terrible experience. Life in the conditions of Thenmaratchi only reinforced it. At the end of it many felt empty as though they had lost an important part of their self.

It is a cruel irony for LTTE sympathisers abroad to put out statements about the wonderful life in the brave new world of the Vanni, where people are supposed to be rediscovering their authentic Tamil heritage by tilling the soil and living as equals. In the face of such claims, even aid agencies are becoming anxious about finding funds to deal with the impending disaster.

To begin with, the Tamil middle class and most of those who went abroad aspire to give their children the best education and see their entering prestigious professions. Almost all writings on the Tamil militant struggle start with standardization and discrimination in educational opportunities. The struggle was significantly about equal access to educational opportunities. It was never a struggle to dismantle our educational infrastructure and go into the jungles. Even LTTE supporters had talked enthusiastically about the Singapore model. This propaganda about the Vanni is just a shoddy attempt to sell and cover up the destruction resulting from the LTTE's precipitate decision and its politics.

Most Tamils continue to condemn the burning of the Jaffna Public Library by the Government in 1981 as cultural genocide. Has not this exodus resulted in unquantified, but large losses of our public and private cultural and educational treasures, including most libraries? Many leading Tamils were aghast at UNP minister Ranjan Wijeratne's proposal in early 1991, which they described as crazy and inhuman, to shift the Tamil population into Vavuniya and then conduct an operation to take over the peninsula. But now this very same 'crazy and inhuman' idea has been accomplished by the so-called protectors of the rights of the people. Has not our case been gravely weakened by recent events? [\[Top\]](#)

The Exodus and the Tamil Media

An aspect of how Tamil society has become paralysed and locked into this totalitarian politics is the failure the Tamil printed and broadcasting media to come to terms with this historic exodus. Obfuscation has been the general rule. There has been a great reluctance to come near the truth, and give in-depth coverage and analysis.

The BBC TTamil Service (BBC(T)) and Radio Veritas, a Philippines based broadcasting station belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, are regularly listened to by Tamils in the North-East. A regular listener in the Eastern Province spoke for many others: "When an incident takes place, the people caught up in it are most often angry with the Government. But they also become disillusioned with the LTTE and its politics. But when others, even those a short distance from the incident, passively listen to these stations, they blame only the Government. They continue to believe that the LTTE is doing something positive and would achieve something. In this sense the media are a disturbing influence on the people".

The BBC(TT) has been very effective in providing versions of events favourable to the LTTE - mainly through the choices it makes in interviews and in what is said. Thus when about 100 Sinhalese were massacred by the LTTE in October, a Tamil politician based in Colombo who was interviewed suggested that the massacres could have been done by other Tamil groups to discredit the LTTE. In the case of the recent exodus, there were correspondents' reports translated and broadcast over BBC(T) which spoke of the exodus having been engineered by the LTTE. But in a series of subsequent interviews it was the LTTE version that was prominent - i.e., the Government's military operation was almost exclusively blamed. The producers cannot be accused of being naive. Any Jaffna Tamil living in this country after all has to be stone-deaf not to know the truth.

The producers of BBC(T) in London cannot be accused of inefficiency either. They even scooped the Vanni based Tiger leader Prabhakaran's speech from the Tiger Radio based in Vanni. The BBC(T) spent a good 10 minutes of a 30 minute broadcast on 26th November giving the voice of the Leader addressing the Tamil nation in connection with National Heroes' Day. The producer clarified what was lost in a bad recording. The Leader affirmed the supposed voluntary nature of the exodus. The speech had its local broadcast in Vanni the following day as coming live from the leader addressing the nation.

Such an approach to broadcasting, which is highly emotional at times, cannot be construed as informing the listeners. Given the delicate manner in which the people are poised between life and death, such broadcasters may qualify to become undertakers to the Tamil nation. [\[Top\]](#)

A Divided Nation: Questioning Ourselves

A few weeks ago an LTTE publication widely circulated among Tamils in mainland Europe, England and elsewhere in the West carried the cartoon of a man in Jaffna covering his head in an attitude of shame. His shame, he explained, was because none of his sons had joined the LTTE. The readers in Europe, North America and Australasia are very sure that none of their own sons would join the LTTE and certainly do not want them to, but compensate instead with financial contributions and by attending vocal LTTE rallies.

One such rally in London was reported in the same journal. Many of the speakers were well-to-do Tamil professionals. Some of them had sponsored the coming over to London of young relatives who had been in the LTTE. Indeed, most of the LTTE's foreign admirers, however, would share an indignation against unfortunate ordinary folk at home who do not want their sons to join the LTTE.

During the SL Army's Operation Liberation in 1987, refugees from Vadammaratchi coming into Valikamam found weddings being celebrated in the usual manner and people going to amusement parks run by the LTTE. There was little sense of an impending calamity. The illusion is often sustained until the last minute that the LTTE would not allow the SL Army to come in. After the recent exodus, angry Valikamam folk going to Vadammaratchi were taken aback to find many of the Vadammaratchi folk defending the LTTE. Again the sympathy many Tamils in Colombo feel for the LTTE is governed by a consciousness of alienation in the South that is oblivious to the experience of the people in the North-East.

The recent exodus brings out again the atomisation and leaderlessness brought about by the bankruptcy of Tamil nationalism. For most people the focal points of community life and leadership had either lapsed or been destroyed. When the LTTE ordered the people to go, most had to decide for themselves and their family.

The abandonment of Jaffna hospital is a historic event where the fate of a community and the fate of a city seemed to rest on the exhausted shoulders of a handful of medical staff tired in body and mind. Having endured much, they failed, and had they resisted then, they would very likely have failed the next time or the time after. The episode, while bringing out human weaknesses, also brought out strengths. It ended very much like many battles of a handful of individuals against a determined totalitarian force. Yet it is an event that we ought to be proud of. It demonstrated human potential and the spirit to organise around a common cause and resist. It showed that the Tamils had not caved in to totalitarian domination, but could act independently.

It is not these doctors and consultants who are on the dock, but the Tamil community itself, the expatriates, the elite and the more than 4,000 doctors the community has produced since 1960. How did we come to allow a political drift where it fell to a handful of doctors to take some momentous decisions on behalf of the entire

community? The catastrophe had after all been in the making for decades. Moreover, of the thousands of doctors the community produced, only a handful were willing to work in Jaffna. They had also spurned the option of leaving Jaffna with dignity some months ago. What have these hundreds of expatriate Tamil doctors who support the LTTE done to make the lot of their colleagues who remain easier and more dignified?

Numerous petitions are being signed today by professors and religious leaders. These neither address the people nor reflect their experience. They rather address the LTTE versions and the LTTE's concerns to the international community. They have therefore nothing to offer the people in the way of leadership. Their actions are rather a betrayal of the people.

There is again no leadership being offered to the Tamils whether in journalism, broadcasting or in parliamentary politics. They, the practitioners of these, do not address specific concerns in a convincing manner where the Government would have an interest in listening to them. Their general refrain to stop the war and resume talks with the LTTE makes no practical sense since the LTTE is yet to demonstrate that it seeks political accommodation and permanent peace. This is only a way of playing safe with the LTTE on the one hand, and on the other, in the event of the LTTE being destroyed, to play the same nationalist card saying that it was not they who betrayed the LTTE!

All this is troubling particularly because of the absence of a clear policy on the part of the Government on being accountable to the Tamil civilians. Reports of bombing and shelling well outside combat areas are being angrily denied and censored. If this direction is not changed, worse may come and alienate the Government further from the Tamil people.

Meanwhile the LTTE Leader has in his National Heroes' Day address in late November asserted that the people left Jaffna of their own free will, and that he would not talk to the Government as long as the SL Army is in Jaffna. For the first time he has personally made a claim in stark contrast to the people's experience. He has both cornered himself and put a further distance between himself and the people. It also faces those who would like to return to Jaffna with unpleasant choices, while the LTTE blows more bubbles of illusion in the Vanni and prolongs the suffering. It would save the Tamils a great deal of tragedy and loss if the LTTE could be brought into a critical process of questioning by all concerned Tamils, and made accountable as well responsive to the wishes of the people. However because of the LTTE's absolute command structure, the supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran may remain isolated from these avenues of influence and pressure.

This places a great burden on the Tamils living here and abroad, to recognise that the community, particularly at home, is leaderless and in grave danger, and to act with a sense of responsibility. Even at this late stage we have to question our politics of death -the death of people, with so called martyrs and traitors, and of children used in bearing arms or used as instruments of terror. In the Exodus we have an experience where the truth according to the rulers is in sharp contrast to the testimony of hundreds of thousands of people. The LTTE's claim to protect what those in Jaffna valued most - their education and their infrastructure so painfully built up - has been laid bare after this exodus. We need to ask, what is the politics behind this and what does it mean for us? Is it possible to sustain a society and a civilisation through sheer manipulation without an underpinning moral commitment?