

300,000 flee war-torn Jaffna region. (1995, October 31) *The Globe and mail.*

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300,000 flee war-torn Jaffna region

Refuge-seeking civilians face shortages as government launches offensive

BY JOHN STACKHOUSE
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VAVUNIYA, Sri Lanka — A major offensive by the Sri Lankan military against Tamil rebels has sparked a massive civilian exodus from the country's northern Jaffna Peninsula and prompted humanitarian organizations to call for military restraint.

Since government forces launched their biggest offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam two weeks ago, as many as 300,000 civilians have fled the war zone to other rebel-controlled towns in the north, where there are serious shortages of food, drinking water and medicine, according to several organizations working in the north.

The military said yesterday it had captured the northern town of Nirveli, only eight kilometres from the symbolic Tiger headquarters in the city of Jaffna, after a fierce battle that, according to the army, left at least 92 rebels and 40 soldiers dead.

Aid workers and Roman Catholic Church officials working in Jaffna said government aircraft bombed several parts of the city and surrounding countryside over the weekend, hitting at least one hospital and killing dozens of civilians.

"It's an utter sense of helplessness," said Chandra Kanthan, a lecturer at the University of Jaffna and a prominent peace activist. "People don't know where to go."

Mr. Kanthan, who left the rebel-held territory yesterday, said 3,000 civilians had sought refuge at the university, while the arrival of the autumn monsoon played havoc with those trying to escape the city on dirt roads. Other agencies reported tens of thousands of Tamils fleeing Jaffna to the town of Chavakacheri, about 20 kilometres away, where Tamil groups and international relief agencies have asked the government to declare a safe area for civilians.

"The roads are full of people on the move," said a field worker for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Almost 900,000 people live on the Tamil-dominated Jaffna Peninsula.

"We certainly requested the civilian population to keep away from the conflict zone," said Brigadier Sarah Munasinghe, the military's spokesman.



New York Times Service

He said the military had heard of only 10 civilian deaths in Jaffna, while more than 100 Sinhalese civilians were killed last week in rebel attacks. "The Sri Lankan military has done remarkably well," he said.

With a torrential monsoon hitting northern Sri Lanka in the past few days, government forces and rebels have been locked in a fierce battle for control of the northern peninsula. The government's force of more than 30,000 fighters, backed by tanks and ground-assault aircraft, has seized about 25 square kilometres of rebel territory.

In the face of a major military assault, the rebels are said to have moved some of their weapons factories from the Jaffna Peninsula to the northern mainland, which they also control. Having lost control of their clandestine radio station, the rebels have started to enter schools to recruit boys and girls for their forces. "They say to students, 'Do you want to study and die, or fight and die?'" said a Roman Catholic priest based in Jaffna.

The Sri Lankan military plans to launch a secondary-school recruiting drive for fresh forces soon.

Mr. Kanthan, who has a doctoral degree from the University of Ottawa, said the recent fighting in Jaffna has been the worst he has seen. He said aerial bombings killed 32 civilians on Sunday. "I saw with my own eyes pieces of flesh that could not be put together," he recalled. "We had to bury people like that, in pieces."

He said most aerial bombs hit the perimeter of Jaffna, which is largely residential. He added that the rebels, who have laid land mines around much of Jaffna, publicly displayed the corpses of 30 government soldiers on Sunday.



A young man is measured during a recruitment drive that began in Colombo yesterday as the Sri Lankan military continues its offensive against Tamil rebels. (DEXTER CRUEZ/Associated Press)

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With a tight government economic embargo around the areas controlled by the rebels, Jaffna has fallen to a medieval form of survival. Mr. Kanthan said he saw two wounded civilians transported to hospital by bullock cart. Last week, the city's only surgeon performed 42 amputations in one 17-hour stint, even though he didn't have enough oxygen and painkillers for patients.

In Vavuniya, which marks the border between government and rebel-controlled territories, the mood among Tamils crossing the line yesterday was palpably

angry. "The army is shelling Jaffna at random," said Father Francis Kennedy, a Catholic priest in Vavuniya. "Their main aim is not to defeat the Tigers but to win Jaffna."

At Vavuniya, the government has resumed its strict ban on any goods flowing north that might aid the rebels. Of the 700 or so people who travel northward daily, no one can carry chocolate (energy food), candles (used in explosives), dark clothing (camouflage), headache pills, bicycles or mosquito coils. They can carry two bars of soap and one litre of coconut oil, an essential for local cooking. As a result of the embargo, the price of soap in Jaffna is six times that in the capital Colombo, while kerosene sells for 20 times the normal price. Potatoes in Jaffna have reached \$5.40 a kilogram, and bread is so scarce that shop lineups begin at 4 a.m.

"Jaffna will face starvation if

this continues," Mr. Kanthan said.

Tamils who want to leave the rebel-controlled areas temporarily must pay a \$2.70 fee and leave a relative with the rebels as a sort of security deposit.

Peculiarly, the government continues to provide large amounts of food to rebel-held areas, through international relief agencies, in the belief that it must help feed its own citizens. It also allows government offices to operate in Jaffna, under rebel supervision, along with national bank branches that carry funds to the rebels.

The government launched its big offensive after the rebels abandoned peace talks in April, when they sank two naval boats and then shot down two military airplanes.

"By war we can't get any solution," Father Kennedy said. "We need a third country to come and intervene."