

Vaharai – the civilians, the blockade and the offensives

The region (see map): The area marked in the map is the eastern coastal belt that lies north of Batticaloa town and south of Trincomalee town and harbour. It is the area administered by the LTTE and accepted as such in the 2002 ceasefire agreement (CFA). A total of 60,000 people lived along this coastal belt. The southern part of this area within the red line is called Vaharai. This area was already badly affected by the 2004 tsunami. Therefore the residents of Vaharai are refugees themselves still living in the temporary shelters meant only for six months that were erected for tsunami refugees. Vaharai, therefore, was not in a state to receive 50,000 more refugees, arriving with nothing.

Vaharai has been in the world news lately. The Kathiraveli school is situated in Vaharai. This school turned refugee camp came under Sri Lankan military artillery and Multi Barrel Rocket Launcher shelling on 8 November killing 47 refugees in the school. People are facing starvation due to blockade of food convoys into the area by the Sri Lankan military since 21 October. Even seriously ill patients are prevented from being taken in ambulance from Vaharai to Batticaloa hospital. More on this later.

Almost the entire people in this eastern belt were effectively forced into the Vaharai area by military onslaughts spanning six months. 36,000 people from this eastern coastal belt were concentrated in the Vaharai area by the end of October and these people were now being militarily targeted yet again. Some have managed to move out of the area but most are unwilling to do so. The land that lies to the west of this coastal belt is mostly uninhabitable during raining season because it is water logged. The only option people have is to move into GoSL area north or south which many are unwilling to do. Even if they are willing the Sri Lankan military has kept its checkpoints in and out of this area closed preventing movement of goods and people.

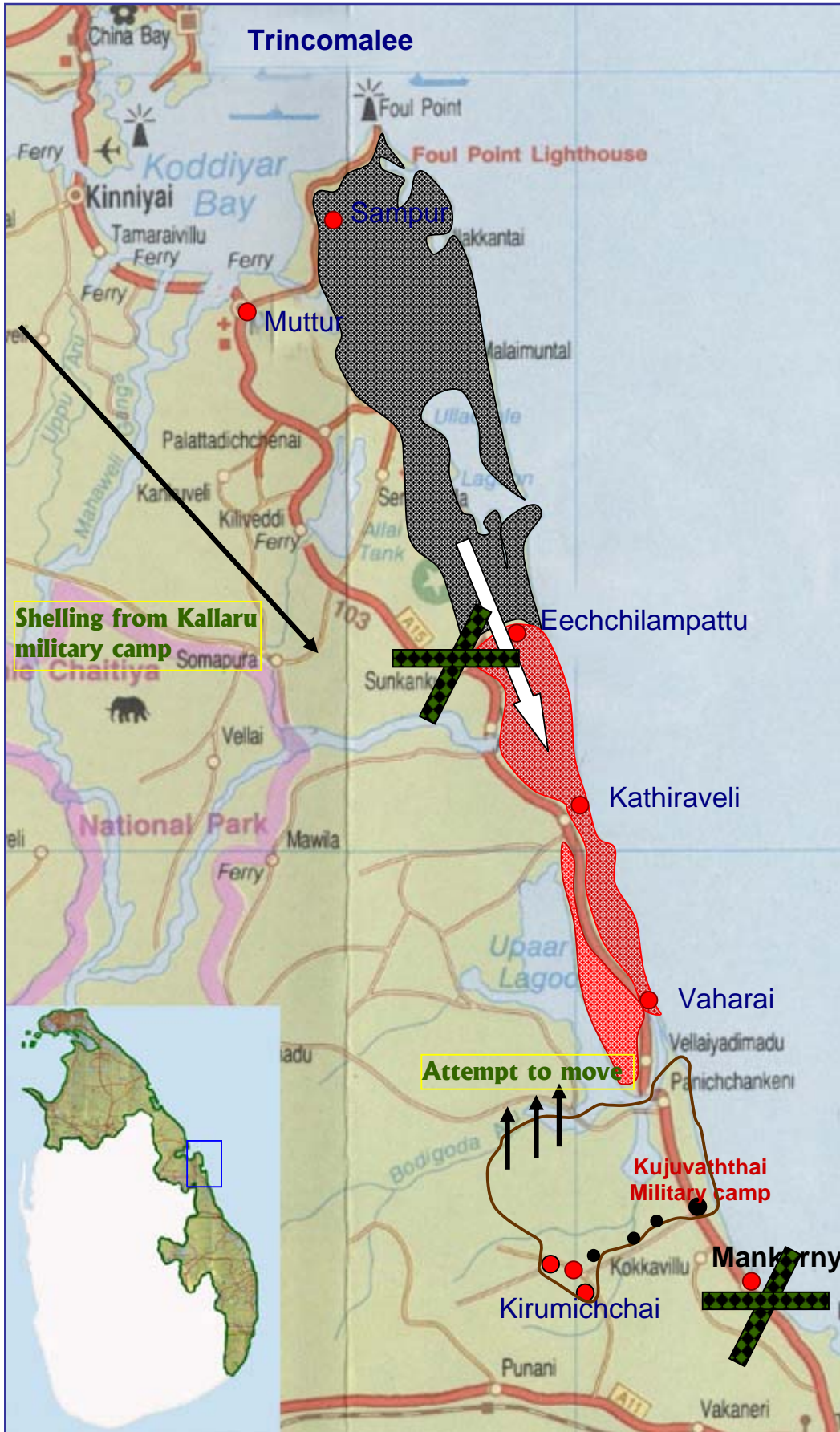
In order to fully appreciate the situation, the movement of people, the military onslaughts that caused it, the economic and movement blockade and the civilians tragedies must be placed in context. This article aims to do this.

Sampur village has come under Sri Lankan military artillery attacks as early as March 2006. People were injured, LTTE members were killed and houses were damaged in these attacks. SLMM that had visited the area has said that there is evidence of damages to the building due to the shelling.

Large scale and open Sri Lankan military onslaughts in this area started with the land, air and sea attack on Mutur east/Sampur on 25 April. 15 civilians including 3 children were killed and another 25 were injured. Another bombing on the following day killed 3 civilians and injured 8. More than 3000 people displaced. On 15 June, Sampur came under aerial bombardment again causing more displacement. The shelling on Sampur continued unabated compelling the school principals to appeal because children were not attending to school due to fear of shelling. Seventeen school principals from this area sent a letter to the SLMM appealing to them to bring an end to the frequent sustained SLA shelling into these areas.

These bombing and shelling have forced the displacement of thousands of people which from then on became large scale displacement resulting in many more thousands of IDPs.

Mavilaru issue: The conduct of the Sri Lankan military and the GoSL in handling the Mavilaru issue puzzled even the Head of SLMM mission who said that the purpose of the onslaught “*seems to have other motive*”. This was clearly revealed by the subsequent actions of the Sri Lankan military. Aerial



bombings that continued for four days on the pretext of Mavilaru issue killed many LTTE members and civilians.

Civilians in the LTTE administered areas along the eastern coast gradually were pushed further and further from the Sri Lankan military positions and started to concentrate in Vaharai. Sri Lankan military then began blocking humanitarian aid reaching the refugees, forcing the LTTE issue a press release, on 10th August, in the form of an appeal on behalf of the refugees. In it the LTTE said,

“Close to 42,000 civilians are trapped and displaced, with no proper food, water, or medical assistance in LTTE areas of Eachchilampattu, Sampoor, Verugal, Kathiraveli, Vaharai and surrounding villages.....”

The blockage of relief coupled with the GoSL military strikes have made it impossible for civilians to seek any safety or normalcy....

A UNHCR statement on 8 August revealed that they did “not have access to Mutur, where 4,000 people are said to be trapped, or to Eachchilampattu, where some 11,000 people are said to be in dire need of humanitarian help.”....

UNICEF estimated that of the 40,000 civilians displaced half are women and children. UNICEF also stated, “There are two areas we haven’t had access to, but we believe the number of displaced in those areas to be up to an additional 25,000.”

Sampur occupation: Following the major offensive on the pretext of the Mavilaru issue, the Sri Lankan military on 28 August began an even larger scale offensive to occupy Sampur. The Sri Lankan military’s stated claim was that the LTTE positions in Sampur posed a threat to the Trincomalee harbour. This turned out to be an onslaught for occupation displacing 46,000 occupants of the Sampur area who joined the already displaced from previous onslaughts in the eastern belt. This onslaught killed 97 civilians many of them killed while fleeing by aerial bombing and shelling.

Once the Sri Lankan military occupied Sampur, after destroying homes and farms belonging to people, it wanted the displaced people to settle back. However, the frightened people did not want to move into GoSL controlled area for obvious reasons. Most of these people having lived in LTTE administered areas are seen by the Sri Lankan military as LTTE supporters. The rampant killing and disappearance of LTTE supporters in GoSL controlled areas are, therefore, frightening to people living in LTTE areas. The methods used by the Sri Lankan military must be seen in the light of the refusal of the displaced people to go back to their homes now occupied by the Sri Lankan military.

Since the occupation of Sampur by the Sri Lankan military, the A15 road northwards to Trincomalee is blocked by the military for the public.
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Plight of IDPs: The IDPs plight facing displacement without humanitarian aid and the rainy season was getting worse. The Sampur onslaught and the previous attacks displaced 8600 students and their 39 schools. All of these students have been learning at the 7 schools that were available in the Vaharai area under trees and under tarpaulin stretched across trees when it rained. In such living conditions it is also not surprising that mothers give birth under trees in rain.

Sri Lankan military had no intention of leaving these desperate people to struggle for their survival. Its intention was to flush out the 40,000 people from this eastern belt for the sole purpose of ensuring its own protection.

On 6 October, at 4.00 am in the morning, Sri Lankan military attempted a three pronged attack to capture the Vaharai area under LTTE administration. Taking part in the offensive with the Sri Lankan military were members of the Karuna-paramilitary group. One group of the Sri Lankan military moved from its Mankerny camp and attempted to go northwards. They moved up to the Pannichchankerni LTTE point. At the same time the Sri Lankan Navy landed troops and Karuna-group members slightly north of the Panichchankerni LTTE point. Heavy clashes ensued and both groups were repelled by the LTTE. The third group of Sri Lankan military attempted to move from Kaddumurippu, an inland region, towards Kathiraveli. This was also repelled by the LTTE.

On 21 October, Sri Lankan military from the Mankerni camp in Batticaloa fired artillery shells into Vaharai area injuring three people from the same family as artillery shells fell on their home. Shelling of Vaharai continued as the parties left for Geneva and while they were in Geneva engaged in talks and after the return of the parties back to the island.

From this date onwards food convoys were stopped from entering the Vaharai area. Even prior to that the number of food convoys permitted to enter Vaharai was severely restricted. Only enough food for three weeks has reached the area for the period of three months.

On 2 November shelling on Vaharai claimed four civilian lives, including a father and son. Six more civilians including a baby were badly injured. Medical attention to the injured has been hampered by continuous shelling. The SLMM visited the area on 2 November following complaints. Yet, the shelling resumed immediately after the SLMM left the area.

On 6 November, Sri Lankan Air force conducted two aerial raids on the Vaharai area. This was followed by intense artillery shelling injuring five people, one of them a six months old baby who is in very serious condition following injury to her vertebra. The injured baby could not receive the medical attention due to restrictions on vehicle movement through the Mankerni checkpoint.

Two fishermen fishing in the seas off Vaharai came under Sri Lankan Navy attack on 6 November. One of the fishermen escaped to the shore and the other fishermen, 21 year old Vigneswaran has disappeared.

By now, humanitarian agencies were barred from entering the area. Even SLMM is given only very limited access. ICRC and UNHCR had gathered material to be taken for building temporary shelters. These two were barred by the Sri Lankan military. They had gathered material avoiding cement and iron which were permanently barred by the military for several months.

Without proper shelter and unable to bear the shelling and the deteriorating food situation people have started to scatter.

On 8 November came the biggest massacre. 47 civilians including 8 children were killed and a further 125 civilians were injured in the artillery shelling and Multi Barrel firing by Sri Lankan military on a refugee camp in Kathiraveli in Vaharai.

Sri Lankan military has put forward three reasons for its conduct.

- The Sri Lankan military says that the route to Vaharai to take food is not in good condition. In particular the disrepair of Kayankerni bridge south of Valaihchenai was given as the reason. This has now been repaired and the route can handle trucks.
- Second reason given is that the people are used as human shields by the LTTE. Note that the people refused as early as September to resettle in their own land in Sampur that was now occupied by the Sri Lankan military. These are the same people who are now refusing to move into GoSL area. The people now trapped in Vaharai will be seen by the Sri Lankan military are supporters of the Tamil struggle and as such are strong targets for the Sri Lankan military death squads. The people know this well.
- The third reason given by the Sri Lankan military is that the LTTE is firing at them and they are only retaliating. Having prevented the presence of SLMM, ICRC and other INGOs in Vaharai the Sri Lankan military has continued to fire artillery and Multi-Barrel shells into Vaharai from its military camps, north and west of Vaharai. If the Sri Lankan military wants to prove its claim then it must allow the SLMM to visit Vaharai whenever the SLMM wants which the military does not do. As a result the Sri Lankan military accusation that the LTTE is firing at them cannot be checked independently. Indeed the Sri Lankan military is firing from Kallaru camp towards Vaharai. Watching this from the Mankerni SLA camp it would appear to have been fired from LTTE positions (see map2).

The military situation since the Kathiraveli refugee massacre

Sri Lankan military has also moved into some of the villages north of Vaharai from which people have displaced en mass and some reports say that they are in the process of converting a school into a military camp. Military has also attempted to move into Vaharai from the Mankerni camp on two occasions and were pushed back by the LTTE.

Since 12 November, Sri Lankan military has shelled Kunchankulam, Maruthankulam, and Kirimichchai settlements inland from the Kajuwaththai military camp (see map) forcing the people to flee the area. These settlements are the border villages of the LTTE area. Altogether 300 families have displaced south wards. The military has now moved along the road inland from Kajuwaththai camp and has setup military posts along this road.

The Sri Lankan military now continues to launch offensives from here towards Vaharai. The intention of the military, it appears, is to trap the people in Vaharai so that they cannot escape to LTTE areas like they did when the Sri Lankan military occupied Sampur.

In the meantime, on two occasions, on 16 and 17 November, GoSL agreed to send food convoys to Vaharai but reneged on its promise. On 16 November, President Mahinda Rajapakse met with Tamil members of parliament and promised to send food to Vaharai. Accordingly on 17 November food convoys were sent to Vaharai from Batticalao but they were turned back at the Mankerni checkpoint yet again. Then again on 18 November, Batticalao Member of Parliament, Jeyanthamoorthy took efforts and again agreement was reached to send food convoys. Soon after this agreement was reached, the Sri Lankan military has begun heavily shelling the Vaharai area making it impossible for the food convoys to go.

Voices of Vaharai people:

Annaladchmi mother of five children: We lived in Kaddaiparichchan. We displaced from there to Paddalipuram due to Sri Lankan military artillery firing. Then the military started firing into Paddalipuram as well and we ran again to Veruhal Muhaththuvaram and then again to Kallady and yet again to Kathiraveli. They fire shell from sea and land and drop bombs from air. We have been running like this since April.



People are dying of illness. There is no medicine here. The military is not allowing even medicine to be brought here.

We have no food at all. Please come and see our conditions. They have been shelling us continuously for 10 days. We cannot even sleep in peace. Why doesn't someone come and give us poison and kill us all. That will be better than this,

seeing mothers feeding just boiled water to babies crying of hunger because there is no milk powder or milk to feed six months old babies.

Anthony Robert father of two children: I am from Pannichchankerni. There were 360 families living there. I have my own vegetable plot there. When the military started shelling everyone left Pannichchankerni. I was the last one to leave. We do not see even a single vehicle here. We cannot even take the sick to hospital. There is nothing here to eat. Not even salt.

Even nature is against these people. It has been raining and there is no roof over many people. The hospital wards are destroyed by the shelling and bombing. There are no wards for the patients. Italy Red Cross is running a medical clinic. But the Sri Lankan military is preventing them from bringing medicine.



George Gregg father of two: I lost one of my children to the tsunami. Like all Vaharai residents we were living in the tsunami temporary shelter.

The military is firing artillery shells and Multi-Barrel rockets. The shells they are firing are power full. There is no safety even in the bunkers. You must come and see the conditions here. Persistent firing, no transport. no food, no medicine. What are we to do?

Yesterday, UN delegation came here. But the military did not let him stay long enough to learn about the situation in detail. SLMM came only three times. We begged them to stay because we feel safer. But they could not, the military did not give them permission to stay longer. The situation is the same all along the Vaharai area. Kathiraveli, Veruhal, Vaharai all along it is the same. Shelling. No food. No transport. Please do something about this.