

# Humanitarian Crisis in Vanni



## Background note prepared by the Christian Solidarity Movement (CSM)

**9<sup>th</sup> September 2008**

*Members of CSM had had visited Vavuniya, Jaffna and Mannar in July – August, meeting with the Catholic Bishops of Mannar and Jaffna, Directors and staff Caritas in Jaffna, Mannar and Killinochi and other priests regarding the situation of civilians in Vanni. CSM members had also met a number of aid workers and priests who are living in Vanni or had visited Vanni. This note is based primarily on their eye witness accounts and supplemented by reports from UN and other groups working inside the Vanni.*

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*Christian Solidarity Movement is an independent group of Christians (individuals and groups) from different Christian denominations, who are concerned and taking collective action on justice, peace and human rights issues*

## **1. Introduction to the humanitarian crisis in the Vanni:**

According to the Bishop of Mannar, who had visited Vanni from 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2008, the number of people displaced in the Vanni is nearly 150,000. UN reports indicate that the number of people displaced in July – August is alone around 80,000.

The numbers don't show the seriousness of the crisis, as most displaced people have been on the move, and same person / family had been displaced several times within a month or even a week, which doesn't show in the statistics.

Frequent aerial bombardment and shelling are having traumatic effects on children and there is very little professional psychological support to respond to the psycho-social needs of children and adults. Lack of transport facilities, especially the non availability and high price of fuel, have made flight from the battle zones harder and slower. People are unable to decide whether to move or stay where they are, as shelling continues to follow them.



## **2. Where are they now?**

For months, many people have been forced to live on roadside, under trees, while some of those who had been displaced several times had taken temporary shelter materials such as cadjans and timbers along with them. Some are in schools, churches and other buildings. Most people were reported as having no access to running water and sanitary facilities.



### **3. Civilian killed and injured:**

The Bishop of Mannar reported the killing of 6 people at PuthuMurippu, 8 km west of Kilinochi on 30<sup>th</sup> August due to indiscriminate artillery shelling.

Other reports from Killinochi reported the killing of three civilians on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> August. An Assistant Government Agent and staff of the the Kilinochi District Secretariat had also been killed and the Government Agent of Mulativu injured.

A CSM member met a priest who had been injured in shelling and come for treatment to Vavuniya.

### **4. Urgent need for food, medicine, shelter, fuel:**

People are in desperate need of food, medicine, sanitation facilities and shelter. Amongst them are children, pregnant and lactating mothers. Children are suffering from lung infections and there are fears of malaria, diarrhoea and other infectious diseases.

Petrol is being sold at around Rs. 1200 per litre. This is badly affecting health services and even provision of water for displaced. Fuel restrictions are affecting generators in hospitals, ambulances and water bowzers and it has been reported that the Government Agent of Killinochi has been waiting for permission to transport fuel for water bowsering. UN reports mentioned that while the monthly fuel request for health institutions in Kilinochi is 15,000 liters, it had been slashed to 6,250 in July and to 2,250 in August and this is badly affecting the functioning of its ambulance services in particular.



Three government hospitals in Mallavi, Vellankulam and Neddankandal had been reported as relocated to the Akkarayan government hospital, which was already under-staffed and functioning with minimal facilities. Shortage of medicine had also been reported.



### **5. Problems in sending fuel, food, medicine, shelter materials:**

A major problem in helping these people is the restrictions imposed by the Government, which is getting worse despite the severe shortages and thousands of people living alongside roads and under trees. The Mannar Bishop reported that the quota for September was cut by half and that the church's efforts to take tarpaulin sheets, even with permission, were stopped at the Omanthai checkpoint by the armed forces. Aid workers and UN had also complained of the same problems.

Priests and aid workers told CSM members that they leave vehicles and motorbikes at Omanthai and walked across the checkpoint to avoid the intensive checking. If they cross on motorbikes, they have to remove and reassemble all the parts of motor bike, including tank, seat and petrol tank, which might take upto three hours.

The number of vehicles given permission to cross Omanthai had reduced and it is increasingly difficult to get permission for aid workers and priests, even for the Bishops.



## **6. Access of humanitarian agencies to displaced people:**

A priest told that no aid agency had reached Jeyapuram for several days after 1200 families had arrived. UNHCR had said that their access to the majority of the 10,000 displaced families in the Karachchi area was cut off because of security concerns.

The Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) claims that INGOs and UN Agencies that are able to access the Vanni are constrained in their ability to provide humanitarian assistance due to their limited capacity (lack of adequate staff and resources) and inability to access the most affected populations due to their own self-imposed, internal security protocols which restrict the areas in which their expatriate and national staff can operate.



## **7. Eviction of UN agencies and International NGOs from the Vanni:**

On 8<sup>th</sup> September, the Government ordered all UN agencies and International NGOs to vacate the Vanni, saying the government cannot guarantee their security. These groups had provided food, medicine, shelter and other forms of emergency assistance to the thousands of displaced and their withdrawal is bound to leave a huge gap. Their withdrawal will also compromise the physical security of local humanitarian workers and property of humanitarian agencies. Already, there have been several reports of the LTTE recruiting relatives of local humanitarian agency staff and taking vehicles of INGOs working in the Vanni. This withdrawal will leave the displaced people even more vulnerable to being in the line of fire of the advancing Sri Lankan armed forces as well as further restrictions of movement, forced recruitment and other abuses by the LTTE.

After their withdrawal, there will be no independent witnesses to monitor observance of international humanitarian norms and it is only to be expected that both parties will be more at liberty to disregard civilian concerns. This will aggravate the ban imposed on local and international media to the conflict zone by the Government.

## **8. Communication:**

In Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya and elsewhere, CSM members have met families who are desperately trying to find out about the fate of their family members in the Vanni. In the last week of July, Sri Lanka Telecom severed phone communications from within the Vanni to the rest of the country and subsequently within the Vanni. Postal services between Vanni and rest of the country are also not operating.

## **9. Forced recruitment:**

We heard from several air workers and priests that people live in fear of forced recruitment by the LTTE. The present policy of one person recruited per family seemed to be strictly implemented and there were fears that this would be extended to extend to two per family. Even older men are being recruited by the LTTE.

## **10. Restrictions on movement:**

There has been no favourable response to the Government's requests for people in Vanni to come towards government controlled areas. One reason would be the strict restrictions imposed by the LTTE on Vanni residents leaving the Vanni and the difficulty of obtaining a "pass". It is clear the LTTE doesn't want the civilian population trapped in the Vanni to leave, as it is likely that this population would serve as a buffer (or human shield) from an all out attack from the Sri Lankan armed forces.

The second reason would be the fact that these people know that they would be singled out for harassment and detention purely on the basis that they are from Vanni and that their family members are part of the LTTE, which is inevitable for most, if not all families in the Vanni. CSM members have helped several people who had been subjected to adhoc arrests and detainment in and around Colombo. CSM members had also visited about 700 people from Vanni, who government has confined to two camps in the Mannar district since March 2008.

## **11. Displacement of schools and disruption of education:**

We were told that many young children do not go to schools that continue to operate, as they and their parents fear for safety. The G.C.E Advanced Level examination and the Scholarship examinations were held in August, while students continued to live as displaced. Students faced difficulties as there was only one examination center in Vavuniya North, while several examination centers had been shifted due to shelling. The second term school examinations had also been postponed.

Many schools have been abandoned, along with books, other educational materials and furniture. Principals, teachers and students have all been displaced.

- The Zonal Director Education for Kilinochchi had reported on 21 August that since June 2008, 33 schools with 10,000 students have been displaced from areas in Poonakary and Karachchi AGA divisions in Kilinochchi district.
- The Zonal Director Education for Vavuniya North reported that a total of 42 schools (covering 3,498 children) were displaced due to shelling towards Vavuniya North during June-July.
- NESOHR has claimed that 58 schools and 15,900 students have been displaced between June-August in both the Killinochi and Mulativu districts. UNICEF had reported that 7,500 children in Madhu education zone and 4,500 children from Vavuniya north Zone have been displaced.

Many schools have been taken to host displaced people and educational activities in these schools have also been badly affected. The District Secretariat of Kilinochchi had reported that displaced are sheltering in 22 government schools while the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) reported that 31 schools are being used to house displaced people.

UNICEF had also reported that educational materials have been lost due to multiple displacements and the quantity of materials is insufficient for the upcoming term.

## **12. Response of the Church:**

All the Catholic parishes of the Mannar diocese in Vanni and several Catholic parishes of the Jaffna diocese had been displaced. Parish Priests have also been displaced and they have opted to remain and move with the people, providing whatever assistance they could offer. Religious sisters have also opted to remain and serve the displaced people in the Vanni.

Church agencies, such as Valvuthayam Mannar, HUDEC Jaffna and its branch in Killinochi, HUDEC Vanni and Jesuit Refugee Service also continue to assist the affected people in Vanni.

At least on one occasion, CSM members heard that priests could not leave the Church for several hours due to shelling, with shells falling as close as 500m to the church. The Church had also been broken into and some items were reported as missing.

In the Archdiocese of Colombo, the Holy Childhood society has launched an fund raising initiative, which will be used to purchase essential items.

The Catholic Bishops of Jaffna and Mannar have made desperate pleas desist from aerial bombing, shelling and gun ship firing at indiscriminate targets and protect civilians, and to enable the Government Agent and his staff to provide immediate assistance (food, medicine and shelter) to displaced people and to allow UN and agencies and NGOs to move to affected areas to assist people with their basic needs. The Anglican Bishop of Colombo had also called for the protection of civilians and for the military to facilitate the transportation of food, medicine and other essential commodities.

The Bishops had also suggested creation of “peace zones” and “humanitarian corridors” monitored by UN and ICRC in order to ensure the safety of civilians and the Anglican Bishop of Colombo had suggested the involvement of an inter-religious body if international agencies cannot be involved.



## **13. Appendix:**

- i. Letter to the President by the Catholic Bishop of Jaffna on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2008
- ii. Excerpts of the memo presented to five Ministers by the Catholic Bishop of Mannar on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2008
- iii. Letter to Director of the ICRC Killinochi from the Vanni Justice and Peace Commission on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2008
- iv. Statement issued by the Anglican Bishop of Colombo on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2008
- v. Report on the Vanni situation by the Catholic Bishop of Mannar on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2008



Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Savundaranayagam  
Bishop of Jaffna

July 21, 2008



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His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksha  
The President of Sri Lanka  
Presidential Secretariat  
Colombo 1

Your Excellency,

I am writing to you concerning the immense suffering of our people who are closer to the forward defense line of the advancing the S.L Army on the Western Cost of Killinochchi. More than thirty thousand people are displaced from Manthai West of Mannar and are moving towards interior of Killinochchi district.

The plight of the people who live in the villages along the Mannar - Poonagarin Road is also the same. They too are fleeing with their families towards the interior of Killinochchi.

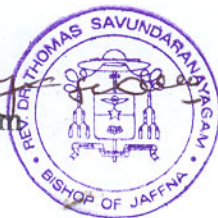
The whole region is on the move. There is no one to assist them immediately. Hence I am earnestly requesting you the followings:

1. To desist from Arial bombings artillery, shelling and gun ship firings on indiscriminate targets and assure the safety of people men, women and children.
2. To enable the Government Agent and his staff to provide immediate assistance to the displaced people with food medicine and shelter.
3. To permit U.N. Agencies and NGOs to move to these affected areas and assist the people to obtain their basic needs.

I take this opportunity to thank you for your efforts to bring Peace to Our troubled land.  
Thank you and God bless you,

Yours truly,

+ Thomas Savundaranayagam  
Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Savundaranayagam  
Bishop of Jaffna.



CC:

1. Private Secretary to the President, Presidential Secretariat, Colombo - 1.
2. The Honorable Minister, Ministry of Defense, Public Security, Law & Order,  
No: 15/5, Baladaksha Mawatha, Colombo - 3.
3. The Government Agent, Killinochchi.
4. The President, NGOs Consortium, Killinochchi





**Most Rev. Dr. Rayappu Joseph, D.C.L., Rome.**  
**Bishop of Mannar, Bishop's House, Mannar, Sri Lanka.**

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Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2008

Hon. Ministers

Hon. Pandu Bandaranayake, Hon. Milroy S. Fernando, Hon. Tissa Karalliyadde, Hon. Felix Perera, Hon. Dayasmitha Tissera, Hon. Sarath Gunarathne and their staff members!

**Memo submitted by the Bishop of Mannar on the day of their visit to the Bishop's House, Mannar to pay homage to Our Lady of Madhu.**

I wish to express to you our deep appreciation and gratitude for your visit to Mannar today. I wish to extend to His Excellency the President through you our warmest greetings and prayers for all his efforts towards peace in our dear country. I also extend my best wishes to you all for all that you are doing for the welfare of our dear motherland and for our dear people. I wish to present to you some of our deep concerns over the sad situation in the districts of Mannar and Vavuniya which form the Diocese of Mannar for your valuable attention and action.

**01. Plight of the people displaced due to ongoing military operations in the Northern Mannar (AGA divisions of Madhu and Manthathi West).**

**Situation:** The un-cleared area of the Mannar district has a population of 39,000 people and they are all displaced and at the moment the whole area is emptied of all its people. A week ago the last lot of people who were in the Vellankulam area numbering 21,000 have moved out and are in search of a safer location. They are mostly staying by the side of the roads and in the adjoining jungles without adequate shelter, food, medicine and other basic needs. This type of mass exodus is beginning to take place also in the Districts of Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu. They all are facing aerial bombing, artillery shelling and gun ship firing. These people at Mulankavil area are at the moment trying to flee their villages and are becoming victims of the above bombings. The above people have no hope of a safer location to reside with some peace of mind as the whole Vanni un-cleared area has become the theatre of intensive war. The whole region is on the move. The children, women and the elderly are the most affected in this situation.

**Needed Action:** There is a crying need to carve out one or two peace zones in each District for the safety and security of the innocent civilians in this intensive conflict situation. I suggest that the region of Jeyapuram, Vanneri and Akkarayan in District of Kilinochchi be immediately declared a "NO CONFLICT ZONE" for the innocent civilians to find refuge. There is similar requirement also in the area of the District of Mullaithivu. Until this is successfully done all indiscriminate shelling should strictly be avoided. Action is to be urgently taken also to enable the Government Agent and his staff to provide immediate assistance to the displaced people with food, medicine and shelter. The Government should urgently spell out its plan for the safety and security of the civilians in this region. Urgent action also needs to be taken to permit U.N. Agencies and NGOs to easily reach these affected people and help them in their basic needs. It is of paramount importance that the A9 route be kept open uninterrupted and no military operations be ever allowed to take place on this route as this is the only life-line to the un-cleared area where nearly 400,000 civilians are living.

*To serve the Lord in all humility (Acts 20:19)*

# **JUSTICE AND PEACE COMMISSION - WANNI**

## **ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF JAFFNA**

**St. Theresa's Church, Kilinochchi.**

**Date: 26 August, 2008**

**The Director**

**International Committee of the Red Cross**

**Iranaimadu Junction**

**Kilinochchi**

Honourable Sir,

### **PROTECT THE PEOPLE OF WANNI**

Wanni has been the eye of the war storm for the past two years. Deaths, injuries, displacements and attendant misery pervade the lives of the innocent Tamil Civilians. The Draconian economic embargo imposed slyly on Wanni has become a monstrous obstacle even in giving relief and solace to the 170,000 persons recently displaced. Day and night, Wanni is thundering with Artillery Guns, Multi Barrel Rocket Launchers, Supersonic fighter jets and Naval gun boats.

**A great human tragedy is exploding in Wanni which is calculatedly concealed from the world outside.**

The Sri Lankan Government and its Security Forces with scant regard to, leave alone the Geneva Ethical Codes on the Conduct of War, humanitarian concern for their fellow citizens, wage an aggressive and ruthless war in Wanni. The sanctity of the civilian settlements, hospitals, schools and places of worship and are blatantly violated with impunity.

The Sri Lankan security forces heavily bombard villages after villages forcing the people to flee from their traditional homeland. Not once, but again and again displacements continue. Even before the displaced people begin to settle down in one place they are shelled to flee again. This inhuman exodus goes on and on. People are languishing under trees and on the waysides, under the scorching sun and dusty winds, and in pouring rain and thundering blasts of artillery and mortar shells. Only a few of the displaced take shelter in schools, places of worship, with friends and relatives. All these innocent people continue to live amidst severe deprivations.

The assistance that reach the people from GO's, NGO's, INGO's and the people of goodwill, even though praiseworthy, are not adequate to cater to the basic human needs of theirs. Even though the Government claims to allow all the necessary amenities, essentials such as Tarpaulin sheets, water containers, fuel, medical supplies and food are drastically slashed at the entry-exit points in reality. There are severe restrictions imposed on the movement of the INGO's thus hampering their humanitarian services to the helpless displaced people.

Besides the old and the sick, pregnant women and lactating mothers and children are the most affected ones. School children are subjected to untold hardship and bitter and traumatic experiences. The General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) examinations is being held in the country now and imagine the plight of these children who are sitting this exam under these tragic conditions. If the situation is such with the grown ups, imagine the plight of Grade 5 children who sat for the scholarship exam on the 17<sup>th</sup> August, 2008. Epidemics are threatening the people in the absence of sufficient medical facilities. Drinking water has become a scarce commodity.

**These innocent people continue to live amidst dire distress.**

These **fundamental human rights violations** strike all over Wanni, and the truth of which doesn't reach the world at large. There are numerous obstacles calculatedly laid across the path of truth so that the dissemination of it is effectively arrested. Instead, diabolic lies are spread with ease. Prevention of the media personnel from entering Wanni and reporting impartially on the horrendous situation of the innocent Tamil people is the most cruel and cunning mode of the repressive violence perpetrated by the Sri Lankan Government.

**T h e c a l l o f t h e h o u r i s u r g e n t .**

**Protect the people of Wanni who are threatened with death and destruction and dehumanization.**

**This is an ardent appeal from the Justice and Peace Commission - Wanni to the people of goodwill all over the world.**

**Fr. James Pathinathan,**

**The President,**

**Justice and Peace Commission-Wanni.**

**email: [vannijusticepeace@gmail.com](mailto:vannijusticepeace@gmail.com)**



## **A CALL TO PROTECT CIVILIANS**

### **A Statement by the Rt Revd Duleep de Chickera, Bishop of Colombo**

People of conscience are perturbed that the current war in the LTTE occupied Vanni places the majority of civilians at tremendous risk. Unarmed and trapped in this war zone, large numbers of civilians including children are caught in the intense cross-fire of a deadly armed confrontation. Thousands are already displaced and can flee only to places of temporary safety.

The situation faced by these civilians is even more desperate since they cannot act independently. They are under conflicting pressure from both sides to support their respective strategies of movement and fear reprisals if they do not. Their dilemma adds to their suffering.

Since both the GOSL and the LTTE claim, they are in this war for the liberation of these very civilians it is imperative that they jointly invite and assist the ICRC and UNHCR to set up peace corridors and peace zones for the safety of civilians. My Roman Catholic colleague, the Bishop of Jaffna, the Rt. Rev Thomas Savundaranayagam has already made this suggestion and it needs to be reiterated. If for some reason these agencies are unable to intervene, then an inter-religious group of leaders must be invited to do so.

The Government's assurance that food, infant milk powder, medicine and other essential commodities are being supplied to the people of this region is to be commended. This process must be monitored by a senior Cabinet Minister in collaboration with the civil administration in the Vanni. It will also require facilitation by the military if it is to function smoothly in the circumstances of the war.

**The Rt Revd Duleep de Chickera  
Bishop of Colombo**

27<sup>th</sup> August 2008



**Most Rev. Dr. Rayappu Joseph, D.C.L., Rome.**  
**Bishop of Mannar, Bishop's House, Mannar, Sri Lanka.**

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ATTN: MR. SANTHA FDO

Monday 08<sup>th</sup> September 2008.

#### REPORT ON THE WANNI SITUATION

I am penning these few lines after my visit to Wannai from the 06<sup>th</sup> to the 08<sup>th</sup> inst. The total number of the recently displaced people is nearly 150,000. Up to the 7<sup>th</sup> mile post to the West of A 9 and up to Murukandi from Omanthai, people are displaced. From the un-cleared area of the Mannar and Vavuniya Districts the above number is c. 50,000. Six of my priests are moving with the people two by two and all of them have been repeatedly getting displaced for over seven times. These priests and those Wannai fathers of the Diocese of Jaffna are tirelessly working to take care of the spiritual and material needs of the displaced. The Caritas of Jaffna and Mannar along with the JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service) are doing their best to supply relief items and other facilities as much as they can. The people are fear-ridden due to artillery, aerial and gun boat attacks and are constantly on the move. There is no hope that they will come out to the Government controlled area.

The displaced people urgently need shelter material and cadjans are in very short supply. The alternative is to give them tarpaulin sheets. Children milk food, mosquito nets, medicines, sanitation facilities are urgently needed. The people especially the children are suffering from lung infections and there are indications that malaria, diarrhea and other infectious diseases would spread. The adults go undernourished as their concern is for their children. Except rice, all other food items like flour, sugar and dhal are given only at times to the people by the NGOs and others. These are available in the shops too but at a very high cost. As their traditional occupation of fishing and farming are not possible, a large number of people are penniless. I took along with me two Million Rupees from our diocesan collection and from what I already had for charity and gave a family Rs. 1,000-00 each per family and we had to limit this to Rs. 500-00 as the crowd increased and the amount was over in two days. There are about 5000 families still to be given. These are people only from the Diocese of Mannar.

Restrictions imposed by the Government authorities on transport of essential food items and shelter material are getting worse. Our quota for this month was cut off by half and last month our effort to take tarpaulin sheets, though with due permission was stopped at the Omanthai Entry Point. This is experienced by all the NGOs and other organizations. Indiscriminate artillery shelling killed 06 people including a two months old baby and two years old child on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2008 at Puthu Murippu 08 KM to the West of Kilinochchi town. Within this tragedy, casualties of civilians which was in the minimum all this time is very much feared to heavily augment as also all the people are converging into a space which is fast becoming smaller and smaller. We are grateful to you for your concern for the suffering innocent civilians in our midst.