BBC NEWS

Sri Lanka: Stories from conflict zones

The past month has witnessed the worst violence in Sri Lanka since the 2002 ceasefire between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels.

The entire Jaffna peninsula in the north has been cut off for more than a week following heavy fighting.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced and the capital Colombo has witnessed two bombings in as many weeks.

People across the country have told the BBC how they have been affected by the escalation in violence. Communication with people trapped in the Jaffna peninsula is proving virtually impossible.

JAFFNA

A Sri Lankan aid worker in the Jaffna peninsula describes the conditions for people displaced there.

I have stayed here to help with the displaced. I am in the Chavakachcheri division of the Jaffna peninsula.

Conditions are hard for these people. For three weeks, there has been a more or less continuous exchange of shelling of varying intensity.

People have been coming from coastal fishing villages, fleeing the heavy bombing. There are very many of them.

Nobody has been able to move about freely because of curfews, so nobody can leave this area now. Many want to move further north and some people have told me they want to go to the Tiger-controlled Vanni territory.

They are afraid of being close to the military bases of the Sri Lankan army. They are frightened of the fighting and the bombings.

The majority of displaced people converge in one location in the evenings because of this. Even those who are not displaced and who live close by spend the night in these camps.

During the day, those people return home to cook, go to the toilet and bathe. But such daily needs are not available for the displaced. Most people find their own food and cook it on-site. But food stocks are limited and shops are closed.

'Emotionally stressed'

There are very few toilet facilities and certainly no separate toilets for women. People have to make do outside and the odour of urine is noticeable.

Lack of soap and limited water means people don't wash their hands. All of this means sanitation is a major concern and a potential health risk.

We have also found a few children who were separated from their families in the panic of the blasts they were fleeing from.

All of these people are very emotionally stressed. Many have witnessed people killed and injured by the shelling and bombing. And there is constant activity. On Monday night, a convoy of military troops with tanks, lorries and buses were on the move further north. From my house, I could see the convoy movement.

Later, we heard reports of fierce fighting in a nearby district. Our curfew was not lifted and we were tied down to one spot for the entire day.

Jude Simion, programme co-ordinator for the Alliance Development Trust, talks about the reports he has been

getting from his workers in the field in Jaffna.

I got a call today from somebody who got to Mullaitivu. There are no essential items in the shops. A litre of gasoline, which was a month ago 80-90 rupees, is now 500-700 rupees.

On Monday in Jaffna, sugar was 60 rupees. Now it is going for 120 rupees.

We have had to use tsunami funds for emergency relief because we have been unable to transfer funds from Colombo to Jaffna. Our response in this area is severely restricted and very minimal.

The basic need is food. There is no fuel for vehicles to run, there is a need for medicine too. In the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]-controlled areas, this is of the greatest concern. Some of my workers are dealing with the injured from shelling.

There has been aid from international agencies and from the government - but since the roads have been shut, nobody has been able to access these people.

We hear about the tens of thousands displaced. But we are particularly concerned about those who have not been displaced but are at home, still unable to get access to food and medical facilities.

KILINOCHCHI

A Western aid worker in Kilinochchi describes how people are coping with displacement.

> **We know that some of them are hiding in the forest close to their houses. They are afraid of being hit by artillery**

I'm very close to Kilinochchi now. Yesterday, it was quiet and the shelling had stopped around Pallai, the border zone to the north.

Kilinochchi is full of transients.

There are Sinhalese lorry drivers who have been trapped there by the fighting. But the main presence are the families from Pallai, north of the Elephant Pass. More than 10,000 people from there have been displaced.

They have gathered in schools and other community centres but some are staying with friends. They need water and sanitation, there are not enough toilets and we are involved in constructing temporary toilets.

This is rebel-controlled territory and inside Kilinochchi life is going on pretty much as normal. Fuel prices did go up immediately, petrol is three times more expensive now. Some essentials are hard to find.

But people along the coastal strip near Jaffna have also been displaced and we know that some of them are hiding in the forest close to their houses. They are afraid of being hit by artillery and shelling. Most are afraid of being bombed by the security forces as they attack rebel targets.

> **UNHCR ASSESSMENT**
>
> Up to 20,000 displaced people in Kilinochchi district
> Displaced civilians in Jaffna and Point Pedro in the far north
> Supplies of food and water "alarmingly low" in some areas
> 162,200 people have fled their homes since fighting began to flare up in April

People don't know whether this is really war or not. When I left Kilinochchi last Wednesday, children as young as 12 said to me of the aerial bombing: "These are only sounds, what's the need to worry?"

So for people who live here, it's not an enormous change. They are used to difficulties.

Both sides - the government and the rebels - try to use and influence us foreign NGOs in this conflict. We just want to remain totally neutral, we just need to go in and help those most in need.

TRINCOMALEE

A 16-year-old Tamil boy speaks about life inside Trincomalee as violence intensifies outside the city limits.

We can hear the bombings. For two or three days this week, the noise was very loud. Just a few days ago we heard bombing continuously for almost 24 hours. It was difficult to sleep.

The first two or three days we suffered like hell but you get used to it. Trincomalee is a place for all three ethnic communities. I think community relations have been OK.

> **Everybody thinks the safest place in their homes. Nobody is moving out of their house.**

I know that many of those who live in coastal Trincomalee have gone to India. My father works in a private hospital. Before, we had more than 100 patients a day, now it is below 50. Because of the fighting, people are afraid to come.

Everybody I know wants to flee the fighting. The atmosphere has changed a lot over the last couple of weeks. Everybody thinks the safest place is their homes. Nobody is moving out of their house. The city is at a standstill.

Sometimes, I think, with the way this war is going, I don't know if we are going to be alive the next day.

A Westerner working for a development agency told the BBC about the situation in Trincomalee.

The fighting has prevented us from doing any work.

In Trincomalee, people are very worried about their projects. One sad example, is that we were helping resettle people into a particular village. We have since heard that the villagers have abandoned the place because of the fighting.

Since the ceasefire many people had resettled in these regions. Now many people are leaving Sri Lanka. Even many of our local staff are considering leaving the country again.

The fear comes from the image of what happened in Muttur when 17 aid workers were shot dead. Local staff used to be happy to wear the t-shirts of Western NGOs, it gave them a sense of safety. Now that has all changed.

People disappear. A young Tamil friend of mine disappeared. This sort of thing is happening and there is disinformation from both sides.

A lot of the foreigners are leaving here. We don't go into the field any more. Once the foreigners leave, any development has to be controlled remotely. That seriously affects how things work.

Personally, I'm very sad. We've been here for four years. After the ceasefire there was real positivity. But we have seen things go down the drain in the past four weeks.

COLOMBO

Priyantha Perera, 38, speaks of the tension in the capital, where there have been a number of bombings and security scares are once again a daily reality.

These recent bomb blasts have affected all our lives. School vacations started early as parents were frightened to send their children to school. I have three children of my own and I am happy that they are at home.

When they were being sent to school, we were very worried about what might happen on that day.

I heard a bomb was defused in central Colombo yesterday. The world needs to hear about this and help us out. We hear about terror plots in the UK and the US. Terrorism is disrupting normal lives all over the world.

It's the same in Sri Lanka - except we live with this every day now.

I never felt a real ethnic problem between Sinhalese and Tamil people. Here in Colombo, I have very good Tamil friends, many of my university classmates were Tamil. We were like brothers.

But now, in Sinhalese majority areas as well, life is very difficult and frightening and there is great sadness at all this violence.

Hussein talks about how Colombo has returned to an era of military checkpoints.

I was born and bred in Colombo, and I don't like what is happening to my city.

The current situation in Colombo is tense and it looks like the people here are getting used to this kind of life. They have no choice.

RECENT COLOMBO VIOLENCE

23 August: Police say they defused an explosive device in a central market
14 August: Seven killed in explosion in central Colombo
12 August: Senior government peace official, Ketheesh Loganathan, shot dead
8 August: Two killed by a car bomb in a residential area

Claymore mines have been discovered in Colombo. There are check posts all over the city checking identity. Military personnel with weapons stand in the vicinity of civilians. It is not a pleasant sight.

The cost of living is going up.

We know there is a war going on but we can't say exactly what is happening. The government have a stranglehold on the news so we don't know what to believe.

I would like to see our citizens move around with more freedom but recent assassination attempts, bomb blasts and scares make this very difficult.

BATTICALOA

Anil, a child protection officer, describes how sporadic violence and tension has spread to Batticaloa.

Compared to other parts of the country, relative calm has prevailed in Batticaloa. There have been a few odd incidents, a few shootings, a claymore mine attack, but no large-scale violence.

I have had reports of severe food shortages in LTTE-controlled areas

For the past couple of days, we have heard shelling in the uncleared areas outside the city. We think the army is simply trying to establish its presence rather than damage people.

Batticaloa is not entirely government-controlled and I have had reports of severe food shortages in the LTTE-controlled areas.

The government has also blocked heavy vehicles from leaving Batticaloa so people cannot export their fish and goods to other parts, it makes their lives harder.

Moreover there are abductions. I have heard of one young man shot dead. I know that children here fear abductions. It's such a pity because we had been feeling until recently that there was a new lease of life among the children after the horrors of the tsunami.

But now they fear abduction. There is a political game going on. People use children in their games. We hear of LTTE recruitment of children, and the [breakaway] Karuna rebel faction doing the same, but we also hear about paramilitaries connected with the government recruiting children.

Jude Simion, programme co-ordinator for the Alliance Development Trust, describes the fate of an aid convoy from Batticaloa to rebel-controlled Varahai further east.

On Tuesday, one of our convoys from Batticaloa to Varahai in the east was turned back because the military wasn't allowing us to take relief through to LTTE-controlled areas.

This turned out to be just a technical difficulty to do with permissions, but it only adds to the frustrations of our workers. We were travelling with the World Food Programme convoy.

Getting access to the east is also a huge struggle. Road access has completely shut down.

We were dealing with people severely affected by the tsunami. they settled in these eastern regions after the ceasefire agreement.

Basic essentials are the biggest needs, food, and the evacuation of patients and the sick who are trapped there.

Our convoy was carrying rice, lentils, instant milk powder and basic food items. These items have not been reaching these people. We need to get them through.

Story from BBC NEWS:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/5278756.stm

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