

## Voice of Shakthi Thursday 17 May 2001

“Shakthi” has consistently spoken out against the helplessness, misery and suffering inflicted on the ordinary people of Sri Lanka by the conflict raging there. This view has been reinforced once again by an eyewitness account about conditions in the Wannu posted recently on the World Socialist website. The people living there are the innocent victims of both the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE.

We thought we will read out a few excerpts from that report in our editorial today to highlight the hardships of these people, who have been refugees on their own land for nearly two decades, face on a daily basis.

*“ The story provides a graphic account of the impact of the Sri Lankan government's devastating 18-year war to suppress the democratic rights of the Tamil minority and the hardships caused by its continuing economic blockade and the lack of basic goods and services. At the same time, the report points to a growing disillusion with the LTTE-its extortionate taxes, its lack of concern for the plight of ordinary workers, farmers and young people and its anti-democratic methods.*

*People here live in suspense, one could say they live a temporary life. There are no permanent shelters,*

*no proper meals, no [education for children](#) and everyone has to always be ready to run for cover to escape the attacks of the Sri Lankan military.*

*Their shelters are huts, 2 metres by 2 metres, either thatched with coconut leaves or covered with polythene sheets. Only a portion of the Vanni-along the southern border of the Vavuniya and Mannar districts is under government control while the rest is held by the LTTE.*

*There are no factories and very few [jobs](#). Two government administrators known as Government Agents (GA) or District Secretaries (DS) operate from Kilinochchi and Mulaithivu. The government still pays the staff in the few schools and hospitals. One bank branch functions in Kilinochchi to pay salaries and carry out other transactions. The chief administrator and other government employees all work under the supervision of the LTTE and its own self-styled Government Agent. Other than these jobs, people have to*

*survive as farmers, agricultural labourers or traders.*

*Small scale cultivation, the main livelihood for people in the area, is continuously disrupted. Those who can farm are forced to do so using primitive methods. A 52-year-old farmer from Kilinochchi told us: "The government in the south has banned everything we want for cultivation. But from the LTTE-controlled*

*stores you can buy things at high prices. You can buy a 50-kilo bag of urea fertiliser-an item banned by the government-at 2,500 rupees. The normal price in Colombo is 350 rupees. How can we carry on?*

*"During the last season, farmers who were able to cultivate paddy rice faced the problem of selling it. The Defence Ministry does not allow us to transport paddy rice to the north. Ultimately we had to sell our produce to the LTTE-run stores at a lower price. We could not even get enough money to cover our costs."*

*The war has also devastated the [fishing](#) community. The security forces have banned deep-sea fishing.. One fisherman from Mulaithivu told us: "We can't go out to sea as it has been prohibited by the Defence Ministry. When we return from after fishing near the seashore, the LTTE men are there to collect tax. They charge us 10 rupees per kilo of fish and then they charge 10 rupees per kilo from the traders who buy our fish."*

*"Some of us have to ride bicycles 40 kilometres to reach Kilinochchi town to sell our fish. Some days we can't sell a kilo at 3 rupees," a fisherman from Nachchikuda said.*

*There are about 50,000 refugees in Kilinochchi alone and about 400,000 throughout the Vanni. The twice-monthly ration for one person is just 368 rupees (about \$US4) which is not enough even to cover the bare necessities for three days. By comparison, the monthly wage for an ordinary worker in Colombo is about 4,000 rupees. "Even from that amount, the LTTE gives us only 168 rupees. They don't care about us. We live under trees. But LTTE does not bother about us," a mother of two told us.*

*Though certain goods are banned by the Colombo regime you can find them in LTTE-run shops at higher prices. We went to a store at Tharmapuram. A 13-rupee piece of soap cost 20 rupees. Milk for children, which is 110 rupees for a 450-gram pack in the south, is around 150 to 200 rupees here. One Panadol (paracetamol) tablet is 15 rupees-12 times higher than the normal price in the south. The trader explained to us that he gets his goods from the LTTE and has to sell at the prices fixed by them.*

*Only a few children who fled to the Vanni from Jaffna have been able to enrol in school. Moreover, these "schools" have also had to shift as a result of military operations. In some places, you see teachers conducting classes under trees or in temporary huts with the children seated on mats.*

*After the school in Kilinochchi was destroyed, it was shifted to Akkarayankulam, 14km away. There are two coconut leaf-thatched huts and some classes are conducted out in the open. There are only five teachers*

*for about 700 students. "We did our ordinary level examination last December sitting on mats," students told us. Three or four students have to share a textbook as the government does not provide enough books.*

*The main hospital is situated at Kilinochchi but there are no facilities to do surgery. Apart from the Kilinochchi base hospital, there is only one other in the district-42km away at Molahavil. In this so-called hospital based in two huts, we saw only one [doctor](#) helped by 14 voluntary nurses serving a large number of patients. At least five doctors are needed but the government has allocated money for only one. "We can't get medicines for our ailments from this hospital but you find essential drugs in pharmacies controlled by the LTTE. But where do you get the money to buy them at*

*these exorbitant prices when a one tablet of paracetamol is 15 rupees?" one woman in the queue told us.*

*To go from the Vanni to government-controlled Vavuniya, people have to obtain permission from the LTTE. You first have to pay 20 rupees to get a form and then fill it out with personal and family particulars and the reason for the trip. Weeks later you might get permission but then you have to pay a further 200 rupees and to provide property and a relative as surety that you will return.*

*There is not much difference between the LTTE's rule in the Vanni and that of the government in army-controlled Vavuniya. The masses in the Vanni hate the PA government of President Kumaratunga and the military. But a new factor is now emerging. People are increasingly disenchanted with the LTTE as well and express their anger against its repressive regime.*

*People want to be free from this long drawn-out war and to enjoy peace. But many of them do not believe it will come about through the LTTE or the Colombo regime."*

Those were excerpts from an eyewitness account in the Vanni posted by the World Socialist website. Instead of pontificating from our comfortable homes about Eelam or a military solution to the problem, would it not make more sense to work towards a solution which can bring some relief to these innocent people?