

## **SRI LANKA: Sri Lankans divided by war: Tamils trapped in internment camps tell of desperate hunt for loved ones**

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The three children standing in the dirt outside the tent in [Sri Lanka](#)'s newest internment camp have not seen their mother for weeks, ever since a shell exploded next to the bunker where they had taken cover, ripping a hole in her stomach.

Medics rushed 29-year-old Sandi to a makeshift hospital, where doctors operated to save her life. All that Sandi's husband, 33-year-old Yogisuran, and the children – Thuyamthini, Kuwanthini and Thusiyanthini – know is that she was later evacuated on a ship by the International Committee of the Red Cross. They have not seen her since, and trapped with tens of thousands of others in the Menik Farm camp they are powerless to do anything about it.

Another camp refugee, Threekanden, 27, is similarly distraught at the disappearance of a loved one. He produces a picture of himself and his wife, Pokonai, on their wedding day. They were split up last month, he said, when the army advanced on the last Tamil Tiger redoubt in northern Sri Lanka. "Now I cannot find my wife or our daughter. The girl is only four and my wife was nine months pregnant. I don't know where they are. We need help to find them."

Countless civilians herded into Sri Lanka's sprawling internment camps are in the same position, unable to locate or contact relatives missing or separated during the bloody chaos that ensued during the final weeks of the military onslaught on the Tamil Tigers.

More than 200,000 refugees are corralled inside Menik Farm, a sweltering 1,400 acres of scrubland sealed off by barbed wire. Some are still hoping to find relatives amid the rows of tents that provide a temporary home. But others say relatives were separated out by the military, suspected of being Tamil Tigers. The Sri Lankan government says it has so far identified more than 9,000 members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and is sending them to "rehabilitation centres", where they will be held for a year.

The government claims that it needs to keep the civilians in camps it is building in the north of the country until it can be sure that they are not members of the LTTE. The camps sprawl out over a vast area, mile after mile of tents where the unfortunate civilians displaced by the recent fighting have been told they could spend up to two years before they are allowed to go home.

Navaratnam Rasapalen, 31, said he arrived at Menik Farm on 18 May. He lost contact with his wife,

Jagadah, and three children, aged seven, five and three, on 18 April when the army advanced.

“The army cut off the civilians in a box and I could not find them,” he said. “I just want to find them. I don’t know what to do. Please help me to find them.” Several others in the same part of the camp had similar stories.

Evidence of the brutality of civil war was everywhere. One young woman, who gave her name as Banji, was carrying her 18-month-old daughter, Umarani. The child’s head was wrapped in a tattered bandage and her right hand was bound up. She had been hit by shrapnel from a shell, her mother said, which had gashed her head and broken some of her fingers.

The tactics of herding civilians into internment camps indefinitely has been widely criticised, and yesterday the authorities offered up contradictory explanations. Officials and military officers at the camps variously claimed that the civilians were there for their own safety, for the safety of the rest of the population and because most “have been involved in some sort of activity for the LTTE”. Some officials said that screening of the civilians was taking place inside the camps, others that it was not.

Despite acknowledging that they had a list of known LTTE members, they maintained that they needed more time to identify former fighters. One military officer privately confided that they were seeking information from other detainees in the hope of identifying the group’s members.

“The problem is that the government thinks we are all LTTE. There is nothing we can do,” said Sivalingam, 63, a medical officer from Kilinochchi, who had recently arrived at zone four of the camp, where thousands of civilians have been deposited in tents with basic facilities.

Others wanted to talk about the fighting and the terror of the last days of the war. Sivalingam described the plight of the civilians caught up in the fighting.

“The fight was going on all around us and people were being fired on. People could grab only their clothes and run. There were shells landing and firing and people did not know what to do. A lot of people were killed in the shelling and the air attacks. Jets were bombing us and people were running and running.”

The Sri Lankan government has repeatedly denied using air strikes in the no-fire zone, but its claims are impossible to verify because it barred access to the area during the fighting.

Navi Pillay, the UN high commissioner for human rights, is demanding an independent investigation into atrocities committed by both sides in Sri Lanka’s civil war.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/26/sri-lanka-tamil-tigers-camps>