

# The Politics of Resettlement in East

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It is today irrelevant how the East was won. Liberation has embroiled the province in too many issues to pause and rejoice. The victories have brought far too many implications for the East. The criticism against the government for letting greater political agendas to be met over those of a human nature cannot be ignored.

**A recent visit to the province proved much of the allegations true. The East is the theatre of more controversies than any it has experienced over the two decades of conflict. Government claims of wiping the province of terrorism holds little weight because there are over riding issues. At the moment they weigh far bigger and have the potential to threaten the entire future of the East.**

**The military exercises following the Mavil Aru debacle has impacted the province as never before. Land as a political weapon is only contributing to the issue. The work of certain nationalist political parties is having serious implications to the war torn districts of the East. The people are aware of the 'needs' being met and the moves to change the demography to meet larger political agendas. The hundreds of thousands left destitute in the camps for the displaced are testimony of a situation gone far out of any one's grasp. It is a fact that some of these camps still provide refuge to those left homeless by the Tsunami.**

The first movement of displaced persons, 6,000 families, approx 30,000 persons, took place in April 2006 from the Trincomalee District to the Batticaloa District after the Mavil Aaru clashes between the Government and the LTTE. The IDPs first moved from Trincomalee to Vakarai in the Batticaloa district, then in late 2006 from Vaharai to Batticaloa. The third movement of persons was from West Batticaloa to Batticaloa East.

Those who vacated to Vakarai from Mutur east including Sampur after the commencement of aerial bombings are in transit camps in Killiveddi. There is no knowledge when they will be resettled in their own lands, because that has been declared a High Security Zone now. Resettlement in Echchampathu also continues. Earlier plans to allow people to return as close to home as possible and start clearing and rebuilding homes and get back to former livelihoods are no longer 'part of the plan'.

**'Sinhalisation' is a serious charge levelled against the government. Moves by certain political organizations to settle Sinhala families within Muslim villages have only poured fuel to the sensitivities of the area. The plans have earned and aroused the wrath of the Muslim community. There is little security that even a military can provide to families thus forced in to the villages. The people level charges against a 'political agenda' of colonization. Attempts to justify 'homelands' through identifying certain areas as historic Buddhist places of worship are also seemingly part and parcel of the plan.**

**They allege moves were on to change the ethnic composition. In Mutur for instance, there is a 52% Muslim population, a 47% Tamil and 1% Sinhalese. Member of the Mutur Pradeshiya Sabha M. Regis claims that the government has settled 25 Sinhala families already. And moves were now underway to strengthen the claims by bringing a religious stamp to the issue. He alleges certain nationalist parties of moves to claim a mountain at Munahattamallai a Buddhist site of archeological interest of late.**

**"The Muslims venerated this mountain for a long time. Then in 2003 a Christian group came and placed a cross on top and there was a conflict that left 10 people dead, Rs. 5 million damages in the town and two weeks of tension in the area." "A few weeks back some Buddhist priests have come and visited the top of the mountain and after that there is a police point so we can't go and see what they have done. They are trying to create unrest again," he charged. According to him since the visit people are banned carrying out work at the quarry at the foot of the hill. This was affecting the livelihoods of many.**

Livelihoods are certainly a serious issue in the new liberated land today. Forcibly dumped in their thousands, far from their original habitats, there is no room for engaging in former livelihoods here. There are no attempts by the government to remedy this either. Farming is unthinkable in the mostly arid lands they are forced to make home.

The Coalition of Muslims and Tamils for Peace and Co-existence (CMTPC) supports the allegations made. They allege that the current development plan for Trincomalee or the soon to be unveiled Eastern Development Plan is viewed with deep mistrust. “This concern of minority communities needs to be addressed and their fears allayed as speedily as possible” they maintain.

**The eviction of 251 resettled farmers from Arafat Nagar on August 10th, without prior notice by the military, demonstrates that it is not purely security concerns that keep the Tamils out of their lands. Such actions and in some instances obstacles placed in the way of resettlement are prompted more by ethnic considerations and than by security safeguards. These Muslim families with permission from the then military commander began cultivation in March 2007. On the 10th, of this month, the military commanded the families to move out, placed a board at the entrance of the village stating that the area was a HSZ and that anyone who entered would be shot. Though negotiations are under way over this controversy, the area has been fenced off and the people are allowed only to cultivate and not re-settle on the land.**

A massive highway has been constructed by the army, cutting across many paddy fields in Kinanthimunai, Perumpathu and Vellalanwetai. There is little evidence that any proper procedure was followed in acquiring this agricultural land. The farmers had no intimation of what was going on for they had been barred from entering their villages by the military as the area has been declared a HSZ.

**The government by Gazette notification No 1467/3 Board of Investment of Sri Lanka Law No 40(1978), declared a new High Security Zone covering Sampur and Mutur East on 16 February 2007. The declaration of HSZ for an Economic Zone will lead to the displacement of thousands. The government has reportedly already taken action to acquire land for relocation of the said displaced families. Eastern Security Forces Commander Parakrama Pannipitiya has been appointed as the Competent Authority for the implementation of the regulations.**

**There are suspicions that ‘a new and trustworthy work force and new communities, most likely Sinhala will be moved into Trincomalee, ‘dramatically impacting on the demography and the ethnic balance in the Trincomalee District.’ Already local communities are expressing fears that their areas are being marginalized and their needs and rights are being ignored in the proposed development plans.**

**Moves under the BOI Trincomalee Development Plan, to establish a nature park and in Seenanveli, north of Illankaiturai Muhattuvaram, a HSZ and a special fishing zone are all hold similar implications. The residents, most of them Tamils of Veddha descent, from about eight villages, have been transported and virtually dumped in the open. ‘They are prevented from going home on the pretext of landmines while their meagre possessions have been reportedly looted by ‘Sinhalese’ from the Mahindapura colony, acting allegedly in cooperation with the Army. The army is also engaged in constructing a Buddhist Temple, Samudragiri Vihara, in Seenanveli.**

**South Asians for Human Rights last week retorted against the moves to Sinhalise the area. “Appointment of numerous Sinhala government officials to the Provincial Council in the East after the de-merger of the Northern and Eastern province; establishment of Sinhala resettlements in Ampara; and building Viharas in Pottuvil, a predominantly Muslim area. The Muslim people, correctly, viewed themselves as being stuck between Sinhala and Tamil**

**nationalisms,” they allege. Comparisons are drawn between schemes, such as the Mahaweli irrigation scheme, to move Sinhala settlers into Tamil and Muslim areas “with the aim of changing the ethnic demography of the province and thereby alter electoral politics.”**

Kaliachchai inside the village of Rithithanna, which is currently part of the Koralai West DS division, was a Muslim area from which people were moved to Ottamavadi and Sinhalese settled in 1990 through the Mahaweli scheme. Some local sources claim that after the tsunami the Presidential Secretariat allocated houses in the post-tsunami resettlement scheme in Pottuvil to 18 Sinhalese persons recruited by the government to work on post-tsunami reconstruction.

**The Ports Authority has taken over lands on the Habarana- Trinco road which they fear will be used to resettle Sinhalese. The people believe the use of the lion as a symbol for the Muslim majority Ampara district in the new flag for the Eastern province is a further message by the government to the minorities that Ampara is a Sinhala division. These claims illustrate the fears of the minority communities which deepen existing divisions between communities. Pottuvil DS is 269 sq km and separated into 27 GS divisions. The ethnic ratio in Pottuvil is 78.11% Muslims, 19.79%- Tamils and 2.11% Sinhalese. Pottuvil is an area that has been adversely affected by the demarcation of the tsunami buffer zone, Sinhala colonization and LTTE alienation.**

Changing administrative boundaries is another means through which the demography of the Eastern Province is allegedly being changed, since it impacts upon the ability of minority groups to influence the political processes in their local areas. For example, in Pottuvil, Navilaru, a farming area was declared sacred land by the Government Agent in March. The same took place in Oluvil. After the tsunami the government declared Ullai, a majority Muslim/Tamil village south of Batticaloa, as a tourist zone, constructed hotels and reportedly encouraged Sinhalese settlements.

**Many groups and individuals the mission met opined that the murder of 10 Muslim men in Pottuvil in September 2006 was carried out with the intention of grabbing land and warning the Muslims that they should not contest control for land. According to locals the Pottuvil murders took place between two Sinhala villages and there was continuing dispute between the villages, with the latest altercation occurring the morning before the murder. The dispute was regarding burying non-Muslims in the Muslim cemetery. Since fishermen settlers from Tangalle took over the non-Muslim cemetery and built houses, there has been no burial ground for non-Muslims. Hence, they attempted to bury non-Muslims in the Muslim cemetery which led to a dispute between the communities.**

‘The Muslim people are subjected to attempts by both state and armed groups to grab land. In many areas Muslims afraid to live on and farm their lands due to formal and informal threats by armed groups. In many cases, though they have deeds to the lands but are unable to use them’. These moves were allegedly underway despite the existing issues relating to the Tsunami affected. The tsunami displaced are one of various groups that have no public space to articulate their grievances. Those displaced by the tsunami continue to live in camps in many parts of the East. The recent spate of conflict displacement has also led to the plight of the tsunami displaced being ignored by both the government and aid agencies. For example, though Maruthamunai was one of the most affected areas there has been minimal rehabilitation in the area.

‘A tsunami displaced person said that in February 2007 the people who hadn’t yet been provided with housing staged a Sathiyagraha to reiterate their needs as IDPs. Discussions with the GA and DS resulted in promises being made that they’d be given land within a week. Four months later nothing has been done and the situation of the IDPs remains the same.

In many cases post-tsunami resettlement has been ill-conceived with people finding it difficult to engage in livelihood activities in the new settlement areas. In Ismailpuram for example, people do not want to resettle in

the ICRC housing scheme as their livelihood is fishing and it is difficult to engage in livelihood from 11 kms away from the sea. 'Emergency Architects' have reportedly been given the contract to build houses in this area, but 2 ½ acres of this land called 'theatre land' has been fenced off and claimed by a group of Sinhalese, who had not been affected by the tsunami, with help of military, police and a Viharadhipathy.

Land has as a political issue cost far too much to the country over two decades, to now be allowed to hamper any moves for co-existence. Nationalist politics must not be in the way of people's desire to live amicably with each other. The country has witnessed too much of the repercussions of such politics to be allowed to dominate once more.

- In Vattamadu the GA had issued a land permit to both Muslims and Tamils for the same piece of land, which led to an inter-community dispute. The LTTE allowed Muslim people to cultivate the land for a certain period of time and then refused entry. - In Thirukkivil, Rasoolthotum coconut estates owned by a Muslim man were left in trust for the daughter but after the CFA the LTTE built houses for Tamils on the land with the help of World Vision.
- In Pottuvil, town, (a 99% Muslim populated area), Muhuthumaha Vihara, an archeological site, was turned into a Buddhist temple with no worshippers. This has been contemplated as a move to create communal tense in this area.
- Land at the 3rd mile post has been declared an archeological site, with the planting of a Bo tree on the Lahugala and Pottuvil road.
- In Saasthraveli 1000 acres of Muslim agricultural land, (which were on renewal permits), have been taken over by the state and a Buddhist monk and 10 children with 50 homeguards for security have been settled in the area. The mission was told that the land is currently being divided into 2-3 acre plots and gradually being used to settle Sinhala people.
- In Arugam Bay a large Buddha statue was placed opposite the main STF camp at the foot of the Arugam Bay Bridge. It should be noted there are no Buddhists residing in the vicinity. Immediately after tsunami another Buddha statue was erected by Ullai town on the beach. USAID which is building a bridge in the area was forced to shift the location of the bridge to avoid shifting the location of the statue.
- In Pottuvil town a sign board which states that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country and belongs only to the Buddhist was placed on a Bo tree. The sign board which was installed a couple of years ago is in Sinhala.

**SAHR**