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by Col R. Hariharan

Ten Sri Lankan Tamils, including two women and five children, from Sri Lanka who landed Aricha Munai off the Dhanushkodi coast (Tamil Nadu) on May 5 2014, have been arrested by police for entering the country without passports.

After preliminary questioning, they are now lodged in Puzhal jail near Chennai. The media has questioned the decision to arrest them as they had fled from Mullaitivu fearing for their personal safety and sought refuge in India. Previously such refugees used to be screened at Mandapam refugee camp.

The incident raises a number of questions including why it is taking place when the internally displaced persons are being rehabilitated; whether it signifies yet another influx of Sri Lankan refugees to Tamil Nadu five years after the Eelam War; and what are its implications for India.

According to the Tamil Nadu Police Q Branch, all the men - S Thavendran (32) from Mullaitivu, K Thayabararaj (39) and G Sudakaran (32) were former LTTE members. Sri Lanka authorities had detained them after the war and later released them. Both the Centre and State have to be extremely cautious in handling against them as they are former members of the LTTE which continues to be a banned organisation in the country. This important information has not been highlighted in many of the Tamil media reports.

Moreover, they have arrived in Tamil Nadu a few days after the state security apparatus was put on alert after a bomb alert and the arrest of a Sri Lankan Muslim suspected of spying for the Pak ISI in Chennai. That is why probably they have been lodged in prison after preliminary enquiry. According to the media their families are being shifted to a Sri Lankan refugee camp now.

Tamil Nadu has given refuge to over 100,000 Sri Lanka refugees who live both inside and outside refugee camps for over a decade and a half. The refugees get same benefits the average citizen enjoys in the state, including free and subsidised rice, monthly subsistence allowance and old age pension. Over 19,000 of them are India-born and as many as 100 are engineering graduates. In spite of all this except for proximity and for global transit, India is not an attractive destination for fleeing Sri Lankan Tamils. The discouraging aspects include both restriction of their freedom to seek employment elsewhere in India and the restriction that they cannot to stay outside the camp overnight. Added to these irksome restrictions, camp amenities are minimal and they cannot travel overseas for want of travel documents. Though Sri Lanka does issue passports to them they are only meant for their one-way travel back to the home country.

So the arrival of three Tamil families reaching Tamil Nadu to seek refuge in spite these problems is very significant. It an insight to the problems faced by Tamils, more particularly the Tamil Tiger veterans, living in post war Sri Lanka. These include political, social, economic and governance issues.

The environment in Sri Lanka, particularly in the Northern Province does not encourage the return of refugees from India who had been living for over two decades. Even the 11,000 plus refugees who had returned home all these years are not a happy lot. They have painted a grim picture of the environment lacking housing or shelter, jobs or opportunities for earning any livelihood for them. In fact, Sri Lanka seems to give greater priority to the rehabilitation of internally displaced persons of the Eelam War than refugees returning home after a long stay abroad. This can be seen from the plight of Muslim families returning home long after they were expelled by LTTE long before war.

It is true that Sri Lanka had released as many as 13000 former cadres of LTTE after rehabilitation training and selective skill development programmes. Sri Lanka has also developed the infrastructure destroyed during the war in the North. These include roads, rail, power resources, and telecommunication facilities.

But there is hardly any sizeable investment in projects specifically to provide gainful employment to rehabilitated former LTTE youth. As overall rate of unemployment is high, they have little hope of improving their prospects. There are an estimated 90,000 war widows in Sri Lanka with the majority in Northern Province. These women-headed families face not only existential problems but threats of personal safety and sexual exploitation as well.

The army continues to informally dominate the life of ordinary citizens in Northern Province. Military intelligence has a free run to interfere in the daily life of people under the blanket provisions of Prevention of Terrorism Act. The continued military occupation of prime land of Tamils

particularly in Wanni area and the establishment of permanent camps for troops established indicate that things are not going to change in the near future.

The feeling of gloom and doom among the Tamils has increased particularly after the much promised election to the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) failed to improve their plight. Through a dubious mixture of bureaucracy and naked power, Colombo has not allowed the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) government to function effectively to fulfil its election promises that would have addressed issues of employment, personal safety and security. And the continuing friction between Colombo and NPC has dissipated the positive climate generated after the election. The clouds of suspicion vitiating improvement in ethnic relations have become even more opaque strengthening the hands of extreme factions both in Colombo's ruling coalition as well as the TNA. This become worse after the TNA supported the UNHRC resolution seeking an international probe into Sri Lanka's alleged war crimes.

Since last year, overseas LTTE elements and acolytes are staging a comeback in Canada and Europe. They talk of Tamil Eelam and glorify Prabhakaran. There increasing political clamour in Tamil Nadu for support to separate Eelam has encouraged overt activity of pro-LTTE elements who have stepped up inflammatory propaganda publicly. To Sri Lanka was basking in the glory of triumphalism at ending LTTE's 25-year long threat the nation, these developments are causing a lot of unease and even suspicion at India's intentions in Sri Lanka. Using the information gleaned from interrogations and recovered LTTE documents Security forces have started rounding up former LTTE cadres and sympathisers suspected of helping the revival of LTTE activities in the North and East with assistance from the overseas LTTE supporters.

Suspiciously close to the time the UNHRC was debating the resolution on Sri Lanka, security forces hunted down and killed three ex-LTTE members allegedly working for the LTTE 'revival' project. Incriminating documents relating to arms and explosive caches have been recovered from them.

In the follow up operations, hundreds of suspects including a number of women have been rounded up. Many are languishing in prison. As many as 17 Tamil Diaspora organisations have been black listed as pro-LTTE. Over 472 persons have also been individually blacklisted. Any contact with them would attract criminal action. This has crushed the opportunity for involving the Tamil Diaspora leaders inclined to work with Sri Lanka politicians for evolving a win-win solution to benefit the community. The black listing notification and the rounding up of suspects has created panic not only among former LTTE cadres and sympathisers but others as they also can be hauled up anytime by the police. They fear for their own and their families' lives is particularly high among former associates of the LTTE. Their fears are realistic as the army seems to have become the final arbiter of many things in Sri Lanka and more so in the North.

So the latest arrival of the three families of Sri Lankan Tamils has to be understood in this larger, complex context. It is not merely anti-Tamil moves by the Rajapaksa government. So it is high time the Tamil media started analysing issues more objectively to evolve positive results to benefit the harassed Tamils in Sri Lanka.

However, former LTTE cadres are unlikely to seek refuge in large numbers in Tamil Nadu as does not welcome them but rounds them up and houses them in controlled environment. But their families can find safety either inside or outside refugee camps in Tamil Nadu. So it is more likely that former cadres prefer to use India as a refuge for their families only. They would probably use India more as a transit point to join their brethren living elsewhere. But as they are LTTE veterans, their potential for using Tamil Nadu as springboard to create mischief in Sri Lanka should never be underestimated.

As the general elections are coming to the close, we hope both the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government will quickly get their act together to alleviate the plight of Sri Lanka Tamils. It will require an overall game plan with a series of actions by both India and Sri Lanka to achieve positive results for the benefit of minorities without loss of face to either their country or their people.

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