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"End is Near" in Mullivaikkal, April 2009 in Sri Lanka

Kaori Hatsumi

In his 2011 The New Yorker magazine article, Jon Lee Anderson wrote with irony, "[i]n military circles around the world, the 'Sri Lanka option' for counterinsurgency was discussed with admiration. Its basic tenets: *deny access to the media, the United Nations, and human-rights groups*; isolate your opponents, and kill them as quickly as possible; and segregate and terrify the survivors—or, ideally, *leave no witnesses at all* "(Anderson 2011; italics added). Drawing on local newspaper articles from April 2009, a series of interviews with Father J., a local Catholic priest, and my own experience of *being there*, albeit outside the Vanni battlefield in the Mannar District, where I was conducting my dissertation fieldwork in anthropology, I aim to recount how this military option unfolded.

The front page of the *Daily Mirror* newspaper on 23 April read, "End is Near. No-Fire Zone Less Than 12 Sq. km., Hunt For Prabha[karan] Gathers Pace" (*Daily Mirror* 2009c., 1). By 22 April 2009, the Government Forces had captured two-thirds of what was then called the "no-fire zone" in the Mullaitivu District in northeastern Sri Lanka—a narrow coastal stretch between the sea and a lagoon in and around Mullivaikkal, where numerous civilians remained with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The civil war ended with the death of Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader on 18 May, 2009.

The number of civilians in the no-fire zone

Along the Mullaitivu coast, the no-fire zone consists of Palayamaththalan, Puthumaththalan, Ampalavanpokkanai, Valaingermadam, Mullivaikkal West, and Mullivaikkal East.

The Sri Lankan government is encouraging civilians trapped in the fighting between the two warring parties to flee to the no-fire zone, or "safe zone." Yet, the safe zone is far from safe, as members of the LTTE, hiding amidst civilians, continue to fight and, even, forcibly recruit those fleeing. The Tamil civilians in the no-fire zone desperately wait for the government's shelling to stop and to be evacuated from the battlefield. The government, however, prefers to *take its time* in its "rescue" operation. "The troops are in no hurry to proceed to the no-fire zone," Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa states in a press interview on 3 April, 2009; "[s]oldiers will not be in a hurry, especially when intelligence reports show dissension against the LTTE brewing in the area" (*Daily Mirror* 2009b).

At the Parliament in Colombo, Sinhalese politicians heatedly refuted the number of civilians killed in the no-fire zone, a number provided by a Tamil member of parliament (MP):

> Some of the government MPs jointly shouted to disturb the speech of Sri Kantha MP, saying that Sri Kantha MP must withdraw the statement he made on the number of people killed in the safety zone area. The proceedings of the House were disturbed for ten minutes. When Sri Kantha MP pointed out the large number of deaths that took place owing to the shelling by the forces, the ruling group MPs shouted at him, calling him a Tiger [LTTE], and threat-ened and demeaned him as giving false data supplied by the Tigers. (*Virakesari* 2009b)

The Sri Lankan government is not counting the number of civilians left with the LTTE in Vanni. As early as January 2009, the government was saying that there were only 80,000 civilians in Vanni. That was a deliberate understatement because today—as of 1 April 2009—the United Nations estimates the number of civilians trapped in the no-fire zone in Vanni to be "100,000 to 250,000" (Daily Mirror 2009a). The United Nation's number is based on the local government's official statistics. The Department of Census and Statistics show that, in 2008, the population of the Kilinochchi District was 147,000 and that of the Mullaitivu District was 135,000, making the total number of people in these two districts 282,000 (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, n.d.) before even considering people living in the other districts that partially fall within the rebel held Vanni area. The government is understating the number mainly for two reasons: first, to reduce the amount of food and medicine to be supplied and distributed to the people in Vanni and, second, to avoid responsibility for civilian deaths.

The ICRC Ship

Transport of food, medicine, and the wounded by land is no longer possible. Amidst the fighting, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ship continues to sail, carrying food and medicine and evacuating the wounded.

Since 10 February, the ICRC ship has been making repeated trips to and from Puthumaththalan in Mullaitivu for two months and counting—roughly 2.5 ships per week and 442 people per ship (ICRC Resource Centre 2009b). The ICRC ship is large enough to carry as much as one hundred lorries-full of food; however, it carries as little as two lorries-full because the number of remaining civilians has been greatly understated by the government. For every evacuee, one attendant is permitted to exit this terrible battlefield: a family member, a neighbor's daughter, a stranger, whoever is still alive. After the wounded board, the ICRC ship sails back to Pulmoddai in the Trincomalee District—government territory. Patients on board the ICRC ship suffer from shrapnel injuries. At Trincomalee Hospital, Dr. Martin Herman, an ICRC surgeon, attends to these patients with an ICRC anesthetist and nurse and a group of Sri Lanka Health Ministry staff. Since February, in a span of 50 days, Dr. Herman's team has treated over 1,900 Vanni victims, removing shrapnel from

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their bodies and, in many cases, performing amputations. Many patients suffer heavily infected wounds—severe infections that occur in situations where antibiotics and clean dressings are unobtainable. In place of sterile dressings, the doctor has seen "strips of sarong or T-shirts" on the patients (ICRC Resource Center 2009a; War Without Witness n.d.).

Even medical professionals are now seemingly being targeted for helping Vanni victims. Dr. Meera Mohideen, a Muslim gynecologist attending to Vanni victims at Vavuniya Hospital, was shot dead by a group of armed men yesterday evening (20 April 2009). "He has been providing a remarkable service to a large number of expectant mothers arriving from the conflict zone," the hospital staff told *Thinakkural* (2009) newspaper: "The doctor received a bullet injury to the chest and was rushed to Vavuniya Hospital, and an emergency operation was performed. However, he died at around 8:00 p.m." This brazen killing of a doctor in Vavuniya Town, an area heavily guarded by Army soldiers and other intelligence personnel, could only be possible with the backing of the government intelligence authority, sending a clear message to medical professionals who are now in northern Sri Lanka: your service to the Vanni victims is not necessarily appreciated by the higher authorities in Colombo. The following day, the doctors and staff in Vavuniya, as well as doctors at hospitals in Trincomalee and Mannar, protested and "threatened to withdraw from their posts and return to Colombo if the Health Ministry fails to provide adequate security to the hospital and make arrangements for their protection following the killing of Dr. M. Mohideen on Monday night" (*The Island* 2009).



Figure 1. Reminiscence XV (2021), *charcoal and tea dye on thick board, 102 × 64 cm. Susiman Nirmalavasan: A mother holds her son in Batticaloa, known as மீன் பாடும் தேன் நாடு (a honey-flowing land where fish sing), where the dead turn to fish to console the living in the artist's imagination .*

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At Padaviya Hospital, 22 April 2009

"The Tigers are now cornered within an eight kilometer land area" (*Sudar Oli* 2009), says Minister Keheliya Rambukwella, the Government Spokesman for security issues. Surrounded by the Government Forces, on one side, and the open sea, on the other, numerous civilians are trapped, along with the LTTE. Despite the military commander's proclamation that "Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, and his remaining cadres would meet their own fate within hours if they failed to surrender," the LTTE leadership refuses to fold, announcing that they "would not surrender under any circumstance" (*Sudar Oli* 2009). Given the dire situation, Pierre Krahenbuhl, the ICRC Director of Operations, warns, "There is a possibility of 99% for an impending final battle in the Government designated safety zone. Immense human disaster and unfortunate consequences would be expected if such an intense battle takes place" (*Sudar Oli* 2009).

Father J., a senior Catholic clergy member, is one of a dozen priests who chose to remain in Vanni to attend to "[h]is sheep" as a shepherd. Father J. was evacuated today (22 April, 2009) by the ICRC ship after being injured by government shelling. Another six to seven hundred patients were on board the ICRC ship with him. When the ship reached Pulmoddai, the hospital was already full. So, he was transported farther to a hospital in a place called Padaviya—only to find that Padaviya Hospital was also overcrowded with Vanni patients.

Now, Padaviya is a town where three districts shared their borders—Mullaitivu District (a Tamil district), Trincomalee District (a mixed district with an all Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese population), and Anuradhapura District (a Sinhalese district). At Padaviya Hospital, Father J. is lying on the floor in pain, as there is no bed available. Two gentlemen come to visit him: Anuradhapura Government Agent (GA) and a high-ranking army officer. Father sits on the floor to welcome them. "Father, how many civilians are still remaining in Vanni?", the GA is asking. Father J. is astonished by this question. Doesn't the GA know the number? Isn't he in charge? The government did not choose Kilinochchi GA or Vavuniya GA, who must know the ground situation better, to be in charge of the humanitarian assistance for the internally displaced from Vanni; instead, it appointed Anuradhapura GA, a Sinhalese:

> GA: Father, how many, do you think, are still left in Vanni?
> FR: At least 275,000 people are still left in Mullaitivu.
> GA: No way, it cannot be true!
> *(The GA cannot believe the number because he was given a drastically lower count by the government in Colombo.)*
> GA: What about the 75,000 civilians who were rescued from Puthumaththalan area yesterday?
> FR: *(Father J. does not know about this, as he has been in the hospital.)* Then, you subtract that number 75,000. There are still 200,000 people left in Vanni.
> GA: So many people left in Vanni!? It cannot be true! I can hardly believe what you are saying.
> FR: If I am sharing with you false information, you could very well bring me to a court and try me there. But I am telling you the truth. At the mo-

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> ment, there are 200,000 people left in Vanni. Since you are in charge of the government's humanitarian assistance to these displaced people, I urge that you immediately prepare provisions of water, food and medicine, sanitation facilities and shelter for these 200,000 people. If you fail to do so, an even greater tragedy might unfold.

The Anuradhapura GA says to Fr. J that he will discuss the matter in a meeting in the afternoon (Father J., personal communication 5 August 2009).

According to the Media Center for National Defense, "between 15 and 18 May 2009—in the last 84 hours of war—65,647 persons were saved" (*Virakesari* 2009a). The UNHCR states, "265,000 people had fled the conflict zone in north-eastern Sri Lanka in the last several months" (*Daily Mirror* 2009d). Where are the rest of the civilians? How many are still left unaccounted for?

Biography

Kaori Hatsumi is an anthropologist whose research encompasses colonialism and neoliberalism within Japanese academia. She currently leads a research project, entitled "Sri Lanka's civil war and Japan's development-craze: An ethnography of illness and environment, response and regeneration" (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) 24K00192). Email: hatsumi-k@seinan-gu.ac.jp.

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