THE EXPULSION OF THE NORTHERN PROVINCE MUSLIMS IN SRI LANKA: THE SHIFTING PARADIGMS OF THE CASE

Seeni Mohamed

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1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island nation in the Indian Ocean, located at 7.8731° N and 80.7718° E. Its total land area is 65,610 km² (Wikipedia, 2017). According to the most recent census, conducted in 2012, the total population was 12.12 million. Sri Lanka is home to three major ethnic groups: Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims. The Sinhalese form the majority, accounting for 74.9% of the population, while Tamils constitute 11.2%, making them the largest minority. Muslims represent 9.2%, making them the second-largest minority in the country. Regarding religious demographics, Buddhists comprise 70.2% of the population, followed by Hindus at 12.6%, Muslims at 9.7%, and Christians at 7.4% (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012).

Figure 1. Map showing the location of Sri Lanka (Google, n.d.)

2. The Armed Conflict and Expulsion of the Northern Province Muslims

The Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka were among the most affected regions during the civil war. Their significance in the ethnic conflict led to the establishment of provincial councils as a means of devolving power in an attempt to address longstanding political grievances. However, the formation of these councils failed to fully satisfy Tamil

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political aspirations, and the armed conflict persisted until the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were finally defeated in 2009.

Before their expulsion, the Muslim population of the Northern Province (NPMs) constituted approximately 5% of the total population in the region, which was predominantly Hindu Tamil. In October 1990, the LTTE forcibly expelled the entire Muslim community from the province, driving them out of their homes in the five administrative districts: Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, and Mannar (Wikipedia, 2017; Jeyaraj, 2015). Muslims had lived in these areas for centuries. Still, by 1990, the LTTE had consolidated its power, eliminating rival Tamil militant groups and asserting full control over most of the Northern Province.

Among the various Tamil militant factions, the LTTE was the most dominant and strategically organized. Unlike other groups that either disbanded or aligned themselves with the Sri Lankan government, the LTTE remained committed to its goal of establishing a separate Tamil state. Led by Velupillai Prabhakaran, the movement was known for its strict internal discipline, with members expected to follow commands without question. The LTTE's rigid hierarchy and militant ideology created an environment where extreme measures, including the execution of fellow Tamil fighters from rival factions, were carried out without hesitation. This unwavering loyalty and strict military structure led many Tamils to believe that the LTTE could achieve its vision of an independent Tamil state. The people in the region, forced at gunpoint and facing the threat of death, were well aware of the LTTE's brutal actions.

Thirdly, the Muslim community was largely unorganized before and during the expulsions due to their scattered settlement patterns in small villages across the region and the lack of strong interpersonal communication networks.

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Fourthly, many Muslims believed that the expulsion was only a temporary measure. They assumed that either the LTTE would eventually allow them to return or that the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) would intervene and resettle them within three months.

The primary motive behind the expulsion of Northern Province Muslims (NPMs), as inferred from statements made by LTTE cadres, was the organization's attempt to enforce its "Tamils-only homeland" ideology. The LTTE sought to convince the international community that the region belonged exclusively to the Tamil ethnic group, thereby securing international support, particularly from the global Tamil diaspora for the establishment of a separate state. This proposed state was intended to encompass more than one-third of Sri Lanka's territory, as indicated in maps published by the LTTE.

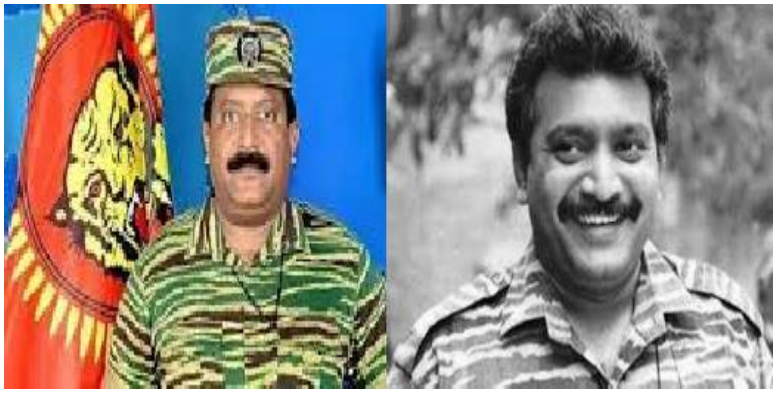

Figure 1. LTTE Leader Veluppillai (Google, n.d.)

Although Muslims in Sri Lanka speak Tamil similar to the Hindus and Christians in the region, albeit with a slightly different accent they are officially recognized as a distinct ethnic group. Another reason behind this mass expulsion was the LTTE's dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of support from the Muslim community for its separatist movement. However, this justification is unsubstantiated, as there were also Tamil groups that opposed the LTTE's militant strategies and the exclusivist concept of a Tamils-only homeland.

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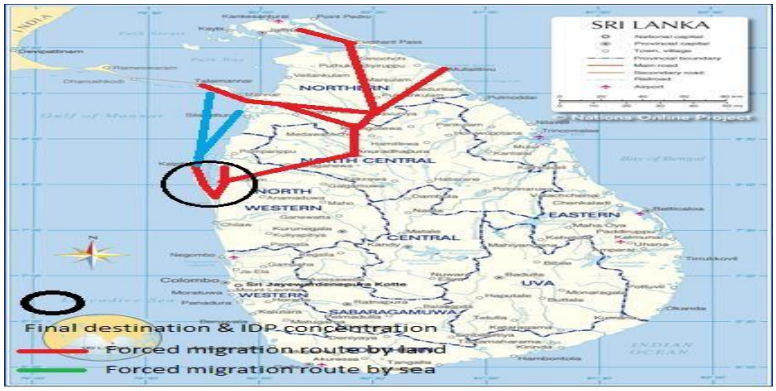

Figure 3: Edited map showing the migration routes of the NPMs during the expulsion (Google, n.d.)

The majority of the Tamil community opposed the expulsion of Muslims but remained silent due to fear of LTTE retaliation. The LTTE failed to recognize the socio-cultural and ethnic diversity that had existed in the region for centuries, as well as the rights of other ethnic groups who had lived there without disrupting the Tamil majority's demographic composition or cultural heritage.

The expulsion was a deeply tragic event and has been compared to the forced displacement of Palestinians by Zionist forces in 1947. The affected Muslims were given only 48 hours to vacate their homes. LTTE cadres used loudspeakers to order entire villages to leave, prohibiting them from taking any of their movable possessions. Valuables, including jewelry, had to be surrendered, and attempts to hide belongings were futile as LTTE forces monitored the situation at gunpoint. Additionally, checkpoints were established to screen those leaving, ensuring they did not take anything beyond what was permitted (Badurussaman, 2017).

For example, some residents of Jaffna, located at the northernmost point of the Northern Province, were forced to walk approximately 142 km to Vavuniya, at the southern end of the region, where they could access public transport to reach an uncertain destination. The LTTE, in a rare instance of leniency, allowed each expelled Muslim to carry LKR 300

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(approximately $2) to cover transport costs beyond Vavuniya (Badurussaman, 2017). Most of the expelled population, estimated between 80,000 and 100,000, sought refuge in Muslim-populated areas of Puttalam and Anuradhapura.

Fear prevented anyone from openly opposing the LTTE's actions. However, unlike in other cases of ethnic cleansing, such as those in Myanmar and Bosnia, no reports of rape or murder were recorded during the expulsion, either by the LTTE or by Tamil civilians. While all three cases—Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Bosnia—are considered instances of ethnic cleansing at gunpoint, the LTTE maintained a degree of discipline. Nonetheless, expelled Muslims were prohibited from taking their legal documents, property deeds, or other essential belongings. Furthermore, Muslim youth who had joined the LTTE's struggle were not released, and it is suspected that they were executed. Additionally, some Muslim businessmen were abducted and held for ransom shortly before the expulsion was announced (Sufyan, 2017).

3. Post-Expulsion Positions

3.1. LTTE

Interestingly, a few years after the expulsion, the LTTE publicly expressed regret for its actions through its mediator, Anton Balasingham, who acknowledged the issue multiple times. The LTTE's primary reason for this admission was its inability to justify the expulsion in the international political arena.

As Balasingham stated:

"The expulsion of the Muslims from Jaffna was a political blunder which could not be justified, and the LTTE leadership would be willing to resettle them in the northern district" (as cited in Wikipedia, 2017, para. 3).

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Secondly, the expulsion inadvertently resulted in the creation of a Tamil-only region, which ultimately worked against the LTTE. The absence of a Muslim population in these areas allowed the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) to launch indiscriminate military offensives against the LTTE, ultimately leading to its defeat 19 years later. Other than these statements, the LTTE made no further remarks in favor of the expelled Muslims. Many analysts believe that this so-called repentance was merely an attempt to deflect national and international criticism.

3.2. Tamil Polity

Tamil journalist and columnist D.B.S. Jeyaraj, writing for the *Daily Mirror*, presents a different perspective. He argues that the LTTE's decision to expel the Muslims was influenced by pressure from the Eastern Province faction of the LTTE, which had longstanding hostilities with the Muslim community.

One of the most horrific incidents reflecting this hostility was the 1991 Kattankudy Massacre, where LTTE cadres entered a mosque during evening prayers and killed 141 Muslim worshippers in cold blood. This massacre remains one of the darkest chapters of the LTTE's violence against the Muslim community.

Figure 4: Photographs showing the people, who were in evening prayers, shot and killed at Kattankudy Mosque in 1990 (Peter, n.d.)

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On August 11 of the same year, a brutal massacre took place in Eravur, a predominantly Muslim area in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, where 116 individuals, including women and children, were shot and burned to death. Similarly, in the Ampara district, numerous Muslims working in paddy fields were systematically targeted and killed on multiple occasions. The violence perpetrated by the LTTE was significantly more intense in the Eastern Province than in the Northern Province. However, it would be erroneous to assume that the LTTE's decision to expel Northern Province Muslims (NPMs) was solely due to pressure from the Eastern Tigers. While the LTTE sought to expel Muslims from the Eastern Province as well, their efforts were unsuccessful due to the region's larger Muslim population.

The LTTE's hostility towards the Muslim community in the North can be traced back to earlier incidents. As early as 1985, the LTTE assassinated three Muslim community leaders at a mosque in Mannar District, along with other sporadic attacks against Muslims in an isolated manner. The expulsion of NPMs, therefore, was not a spontaneous decision but a meticulously planned operation. Given that the Eastern Tigers were not native to the Northern Province, likely, they were deliberately deployed there to assist in what has been described as an act of ethnic cleansing. This notion is supported by documented statements and events, including an intervention by Karikalan, the LTTE's Eastern political chief, who traveled to the North to persuade LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran to take decisive action against the Muslim population. Karikalan reportedly insisted on teaching the Muslims a lesson. Concurrently, tensions escalated following an incident in Chavakachcheri, in the Thenmarachchi sector of the Jaffna Peninsula (Jeyaraj, 2015, para. 14).

3.3. Tamil Political Response to the Expulsion

The Tamil political leadership largely remained silent during the war and did not openly oppose the LTTE's expulsion of Muslims, even though many Tamil political figures were

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fundamentally against this decision. Only in the aftermath of the LTTE's demise did some Tamil leaders publicly express their concerns regarding the expulsion. M.A. Sumanthiran, a prominent Member of Parliament representing the Tamil National Alliance, later advocated for the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) to pass a resolution acknowledging and regretting the mass expulsion of Muslims from the Northern Province by the LTTE in October–November 1990 (Adaderana, 2017, para. 1).

Sumanthiran further stated:

"Just as it passed a resolution condemning the genocide conducted against the Tamils, the NPC should pass a resolution condemning the mass expulsion of Muslims by the LTTE, which amounts to ethnic cleansing. If the NPC does not do it, the world will not take the Tamils' contention that they had been subjected to genocide seriously." (Adaderana, 2017, para. 3)

3.4. Response of the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL)

At the time, the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) was unable to take effective action against the LTTE's mass expulsion of Muslims, as it was struggling to maintain control over its capital, Colombo. The LTTE's air force had successfully executed attacks on Colombo during the later years of the war, further straining government resources. Consequently, the GOSL's response to the plight of the displaced Northern Muslims was limited. The government provided basic assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) through its welfare centers, but comprehensive measures to address their long-term resettlement and rehabilitation were largely absent.

3.5 International Community's Role and Inaction

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The international response to the crisis was largely inadequate. While Muslim-majority countries, particularly from the Middle East, and some Western nations provided material assistance on an ad hoc basis, there was little international intervention in terms of protecting the fundamental human rights of the expelled Muslims. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), despite its mandate to assist displaced populations, did not implement a structured resettlement program for the affected community.

Instead, the UNHCR primarily focused on resettling Muslim IDPs in the Puttalam District, where they had initially taken refuge. This approach led to suspicions that the UNHCR was inadvertently reinforcing the notion of a Tamils-only homeland by altering the ethnic composition of the Northern Province. The organization later admitted that financial constraints and the prioritization of Tamil IDPs over Muslim IDPs had prevented a more equitable response (Hanifa, 2015). This failure directly violated the principles outlined in Section V, Principle 28 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (UNHCR, 2014), which obligates international bodies to support the resettlement of displaced populations in their places of origin.

4. Impact of the Expulsion

The expulsion of Northern Muslims had catastrophic consequences. The affected individuals were forcibly displaced with no opportunity to take their movable assets, including cash savings, which were seized under the pretext that they had been earned in Tamil Eelam. Thousands of cattle were confiscated by the LTTE, and immovable properties were either looted or destroyed. Residential structures were dismantled for their building materials, and aerial bombings further obliterated the remaining infrastructure (Mahddom, 2017; Rifas, 2017; Nasar, 2017).

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The sudden loss of economic stability plunged the entire NPM community into poverty. Many formerly affluent families found themselves in dire financial conditions overnight. The psychological trauma of the expulsion also had profound effects, with numerous individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Dr. Jayasinha, a psychiatrist and professor at the School of Medicine, University of Peradeniya, reported treating alone over 30 patients suffering from severe mental distress in early 1991 (Thawfeek, 2017).

Socially, displaced Muslim men faced significant challenges in securing employment, as most were farmers and struggled to find alternative livelihoods in host communities. This led to a cultural shift where Muslim women, who traditionally had not engaged in agricultural labor, were compelled to work in onion fields, creating internal social conflicts.

Education was also severely disrupted. IDP children had limited access to schooling due to overcrowding and resource constraints. Many IDP students were allowed to attend school only in the afternoon for three hours, following the completion of classes for host community students. Additionally, the lack of stable housing and economic hardship further impeded their academic progress.

5. Return and Resettlement Efforts

With the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, Muslim IDPs initiated a voluntary return to their original homes in 2010. However, their resettlement was plagued by severe challenges. By the time the displaced Muslims returned, their former villages had been overtaken by dense forests, making habitation difficult. The GOSL provided only minimal financial assistance for clearing the land, and returning families faced the added danger of wild elephants that had migrated into the abandoned areas. Identifying land boundaries was another major challenge, often requiring the assistance of elderly community members. Housing remained a critical

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issue. The GOSL did not allocate resources for the reconstruction of Muslim-majority war-affected areas. Neither the government nor international organizations, including the UNHCR, had an accurate count of how many families had returned or remained displaced. Local government agencies merely registered returning families for administrative purposes without providing a structured resettlement plan.

Despite ongoing demands by Muslim civil organizations for the establishment of a Presidential Commission to address the grievances of Muslim IDPs, successive governments have failed to act. Protest demonstrations held annually in October continue to highlight the plight of displaced Muslims, yet their demands for justice remain unmet after nearly three decades.

6. Recommendations and Policy Proposals

The expulsion and displacement of Northern Muslims should be recognized as a grave violation of human rights, particularly as this community had peacefully coexisted with others for centuries and did not partake in the armed conflict. Addressing their grievances and restoring their rights must be guided by international human rights and humanitarian law, consistent with practices in similar post-conflict settings worldwide.

The following recommendations outline necessary measures for a structured and time-bound approach to resolving the plight of Northern Muslim IDPs through well-designed policies and projects:

6.1. Enhanced Role of the UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which is mandated to resettle IDPs when local authorities fail to do so, must prioritize the issues of Northern

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Muslim IDPs in Sri Lanka with genuine commitment and accountability. The UNHCR should not justify inaction based on funding shortages or comparative prioritization between Tamil and Muslim IDPs. If local authorities undertake resettlement efforts, UNHCR should assume a monitoring and evaluation role to ensure that the process remains free from political or ethnic bias. UNHCR personnel, including local staff, must adhere strictly to international humanitarian provisions and must not be influenced by local political figures who act against these principles.

6.2. Government Accountability and Investigation

The Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) should establish a Presidential Commission to conduct an in-depth investigation into the grievances of Northern Muslim IDPs and propose appropriate policy measures. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) previously identified unresolved issues related to displaced communities. The government should act on the LLRC's recommendations and further investigate unresolved concerns.

6.3. Land Allocation for Returning IDPs:

Landless Muslim IDPs should be allocated plots for residential purposes. For families engaged in agriculture, additional land should be allocated to enable them to resume farming activities.

6.4. Provision of Adequate Housing:

Every returning family—both those who have already resettled and those planning to return—should be provided with proper housing by international standards for IDP resettlement. Housing Solutions Based on Geographic Suitability:

In rural areas, a single housing system is a feasible option. However, for land conservation and efficiency, multi-storied housing schemes should also be considered.

Special housing solutions should be designed for farming families based on their

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occupational needs. Urban Housing Strategy for Jaffna Town and Other Municipal Areas
In urban areas such as Jaffna Town, where land is scarce, the government should construct condominiums to accommodate returning Muslim IDPs. Given the high population density of urban centers, single-unit housing is not a viable option; therefore, vertical housing schemes should be developed instead.

6.5. Livelihood Restoration Programs:

Economic rehabilitation projects should be established, particularly targeting the younger generation to create sustainable employment opportunities. Public sector employment should be made accessible to educated IDPs, ensuring their integration into government institutions.

6.6. Modernization of Agriculture and Fisheries

The majority of returning IDPs are engaged in agriculture and fishing. However, existing farming and fishing techniques are outdated and inefficient. The government should introduce modern agricultural and fishing technologies to enhance productivity and ensure long-term economic sustainability.

6.7. Fair Compensation for Lost Property and Livelihood

Returning Muslim IDPs have lost all assets and means of income, leaving them economically vulnerable. A reasonable financial compensation package or an equivalent economic assistance program should be implemented. This recommendation aligns with Article 2, Principle 28, Section V of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (UNHCR, 2014), which emphasizes the right of IDPs to receive adequate assistance and reparations.

7. Conclusion

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The plight of Northern Muslim IDPs in Sri Lanka remains a long-standing humanitarian crisis that has yet to be adequately addressed. Despite being forcibly displaced over three decades ago, these individuals continue to face challenges related to land ownership, housing, economic rehabilitation, and social integration. The lack of governmental and international intervention has exacerbated their marginalization.

It is imperative that both the Sri Lankan government and international organizations recognize the historical injustices faced by this community and undertake systematic, policy-driven measures to restore their rights. The proposed recommendations outlined above offer a framework for sustainable resettlement, economic recovery, and social reintegration. Without decisive action, the prolonged suffering of Northern Muslim IDPs will continue, perpetuating a cycle of economic hardship, social exclusion, and political neglect

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