

Northern Muslims' Concerns - 17 years since the eviction

In October 1990, some 75,000 Muslims in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka were dragged into Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict when they were forcibly expelled from their northern homeland by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Under threat of death the northern Muslim community from five districts were given 48 hours (in some instances only 2 hours) to leave their homeland; they were allowed to take only Rs. 300 per family and some clothing. Many of them walked, for as long as 3 days in some cases, only being able to get transport when reaching border towns further south.

After expelling the Muslims the LTTE cordoned off the locations of their homes with ropes and a Tamil newspaper reported that this was done to protect the property till the Muslims returned. Most of the dazed Muslims too thought that their expulsion was only temporary. The then government did not show any interest in providing protection for these expelled Muslims or safeguarding their property left behind, even though over 85% of the evicted Muslims lived in government controlled areas of north. It was the Puttalam Muslims and some international non governmental organizations which came to their rescue. Meanwhile the LTTE looted almost all possessions left in the Muslim houses. Many houses were stripped off tiles, wooden frames, doors, windows, etc. Even though the LTTE received tremendous criticism for this terrible act of ethnic cleansing, the LTTE leader Pirapakaran who needs to take responsibility for this has been conspicuously silent on the subject so far. Even during the 2002 peace negotiations, the parties engaged in talks did not want to consider the northern Muslims' right to collective return as one of the primary conditions for establishing normalcy in the north. This was the main reason for the low rate of Muslim IDP return in comparison to Tamil IDP return during the last peace process.

Given the relatively low political importance of the Muslims in Sri Lanka in general and the Muslims of the Northern Province in particular, the plight of the northern Muslims has received very little attention at the time of the expulsion and in the subsequent 17 years. Ever since the eviction, the majority of the northern Muslims have been living in temporary shelters in Puttalam district. Puttalam district has a significant population who live in poverty. They were initially cared for by the local Muslim community that is now overwhelmed with stagnated IDP population without adequate additional public resource allocation. The location of IDP camps is usually distant from main roads, transport, health and education facilities. Some in the community whose traditional livelihood was farming have been confined to barren land. Despite assistance from international NGOs, local NGOs, and from the government, this group continues to face many of the poor conditions that they first dealt with 17 years ago. Life in the camps brought with it the destruction of the family. Men could not obtain work and found themselves unable to maintain an independent livelihood. Women became the main contributors to the economy of the displaced community. They have been faced with innumerable problems not only because of the limited space that they have as Muslim women but also as IDPs. They are extremely vulnerable in the public domain and exploited and abused in their private space (camps/homes) as well. Today most of the internally displaced women wear fully concealing garb in order to assimilate with the host community Muslims who practice orthodox Islam. This in some instances has had an adverse impact upon women. Prior to the eviction the northern Muslim women had a very relaxed local-culture based sense of dress and were more mobile.

Over the course of 17 years, many Muslim children have been born into displacement and homeless, with birth certificates labeling them as refugees, even though they were born in Sri Lanka. Displaced children found it hard to assimilate and were often discriminated against.

There has been an ongoing struggle by the IDP community with regard to obtaining their quota of government resources. Puttlam authorities claim that the IDPs should obtain public resources and university quotas from the north, and northern authorities insist that since the evictees have been living in Puttlam for an extended period it should be the affair of Puttlam Government Agent. Reallocation of public resources is an urgent and vital concern.

Unfortunately there is a widespread belief that the northern displaced community has been settled, looked after and that everything is fine with them. Yet their significant political, social, economic, health, education, and human rights violations have been ignored. The core issues such as right to return, right to have alternatives to return and also right to live with dignity and respect in the places of displacement have yet to be addressed and obtained. The absence of addressing those vital issues of displaced has created confusion among IDPs about the future status in this country in general. In the case of northern Muslims they are confused about their future in the place of displacement and in the place of origin. Short term and ad-hoc measures that have been implemented among displaced have been interpreted as what the displaced deserve. Politics and politicians always manipulate the situation to their favor and at the end political agenda on displaced become reality which has so far led to further deteriorating situation of Northern Muslim IDPs.

The issues of return not only involves safety (given the ongoing militarization and war) and specific guarantees from the LTTE. Return is often understood by the Government and humanitarian agencies as a family oriented process whereas for the forcibly expelled Muslims and other displaced communities there is a significant community element. This is particularly relevant for the more isolated communities. Returnees also face difficulties in accessing and reclaiming land and property. Reintegration is a critical challenge in an area that has been deliberately made mono ethnic and where the religious and administrative authorities have got used to a mono ethnic northern province.

Northern Muslims' Plea:

- Any political solution to the ethnic conflict must include the northern Muslims' rights to return to their homes/homeland. This should be recognized at national and international levels. And is non-negotiable.
- The LTTE and Sri Lankan government should work on an agreement that will ensure northern Muslims' safety and on their collective return to the north. This agreement should have conditions that will bring about a conducive environment in which the Tamil & Muslim communities can coexist once again. Such an agreement can only be equitably worked out if the representatives of northern Muslims are an equal party to it.