

My final days in the Vanni.

My final two weeks in Kilinochchi saw the town and surrounding villages change dramatically. The escalating war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) changed the face of the town and the movement of the civilians in the area called the Vanni.

The sense that I got living in Kilinochchi was of this massive army approaching along the southwestern front. I never heard gunfire or sounds of fighting, all I could hear, day and night was the constant thuds and booms of artillery and multi barrels landing in the distance. Day by day, the constant rumble of heavy artillery got closer and closer to Kilinochchi town. 24 hours a day my office, bedroom, kitchen and bunker would be shaking with the thuds of artillery shells landing. The sensation of the approaching doom was all too real with this kind of warfare.

As an aid worker I was struggling to provide much needed assistance to the ever increasing number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) who had fled from the unbearable noise and fear of the approaching artillery, mostly in the southwestern areas of the Vanni. Due to a severe lack of mobility, families displaced just a few 10's of kilometers and sheltered under trees for sometimes only a number of days until the army shelling caught up with them and they had to displace again. Many of these areas were out of bounds for us as aid workers due to the high security risk. We began to meet the IDP's as they came closer to Kilinochchi, with stories of their multiple displacements. The people we met were hungry, tired, afraid and traumatized. The children had not attended school for months, fathers had lost their livelihoods such as fishing boats, nets and engines, and mothers were dealing with the raw emotion of just not being able to protect, feed and educate their children.



As aid agencies we tried our best to provide shelter, water and sanitation facilities to the people; we built emergency camps in areas that we predicted would be safe havens for people to gather, but as the days went by and the army approached Kilinochchi, the distant rumble of artillery rapidly escalated into a constant roar of shells raining down, in and around the town. Our own

security was jeopardized and we were unable to continue to provide further assistance.

The security situation spiraled to emergency levels and artillery and air attacks on Kilinochchi town became a frequent event. The Sri Lankan Government put pressure on us to leave as they could not insure our safety anymore in Kilinochchi. We were ten internationals there at the time and had to begin the heartbreaking task of trying to close our offices and relocate to Government areas.

Emotions were very high through these days, dealing with the guilt and frustration of having to leave an area at the time when humanitarian assistance was needed the most by the community that we had all got to know and develop strong relationships with. Stopping our programmes was professionally hard, but our staff became the focal point of our emotional state.

The LTTE has a pass system for those who want to leave the Vanni into Government areas and many of our staff were not granted this pass for one reason or another. The staff that were granted the pass and able to leave with us had to leave their families behind as they were not granted a pass. Therefore staff members had to make the choice of leaving their spouse and children behind under a barrage of shells and air attacks to come with us to continue to work and earn money, or stay behind with their family and face the possible recruitment of the LTTE and fight in the war.

To manage, advise and counsel our staff through this process was the hardest emotion I, and many of us had ever dealt with. As the roar of the shells got ever closer to Kilinochchi the emergency of the decision making increased and staff had to begin to move to Government areas leaving children and spouses behind.



I remember one morning when an air attack happened very close to me. I managed to get into the bunker quickly and narrowly escaped being hurt. I will never forget the noise of that fighter jet, the unbelievable sound of the engine as it swooped from the sky and the explosions of the bombs it dropped close by. But the lasting image I have is of the sheer panic and traumatized people

when I emerged from my bunker. As aid agencies we have concrete fortified

bunkers, but the population of Kilinochchi has muddy holes in the ground. I saw children shaking with fear and mothers trying to calm them while they themselves were shaking with fear.

We were scheduled to leave Kilinochchi on Friday, 12th September but large-scale civil protests were held outside our compounds. The people were chanting “Don’t Leave, Don’t Leave”. The protesters were so polite and respectful to us, they were not angry, they were desperate. They understood that we needed to close our programmes and told us that they would manage themselves with shelter and water but our physical departure was what terrified them. With no international presence and no witness to the conflict, many atrocities would occur and no one would see this.



For 3 days the protests continued outside our compounds. We all understood and felt their fear but our hands were also tied at this point. The situation was becoming incredibly dangerous; some internationals had to leave their compounds and move to ‘safer areas’ as artillery shells were landing within a few hundred meters of our compounds. For the final

two days in Kilinochchi we spent much time in our bunkers as the artillery and air attacks intensified in and around the town. The sound through these days was tremendous, everything would shake and the air implode as the shells landed. In the near distance we could hear the terrifying sound of helicopter gunships, firing rocket launchers.

The residents of Kilinochchi town began to displace and travel north, away from the approaching artillery, and it was clear that we would have to leave the following day otherwise we would be stuck there.

On the morning of the 16th we lined our vehicles up at our compound and under heavy shelling and air attacks, wearing ballistic vests and helmets, we evacuated Kilinochchi town and



headed for the Government areas. We left a number of our staff, who could not get passes, behind. We shared tears, we shared the feelings of terror and intense guilt, and we left.



I remember the deep emotion of shame as I drove past civilians who were watching me from the side of the road, in my ballistic vest, heading for safety, as they stood there in their trousers and shirts and sari's. We drove through the site of a fresh air attack on the A9 road and once again saw the devastation it causes and understood what was to come for Kilinochchi and its civilian population.

Now out and safe, I am dealing with a great sense of abandonment, of guilt, of lack of faith in the international system that can allow this to happen; of disillusionment in the system that I have worked for that flees an area and a people in their greatest hour of need; the pain of saying goodbye and good luck to our staff that worked so hard and with such passion for the IDP's of the area, and we left them there to become IDP's themselves.

Peace.

D.

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