

Menik Farm: in the experience of an inmate from March to July 2009

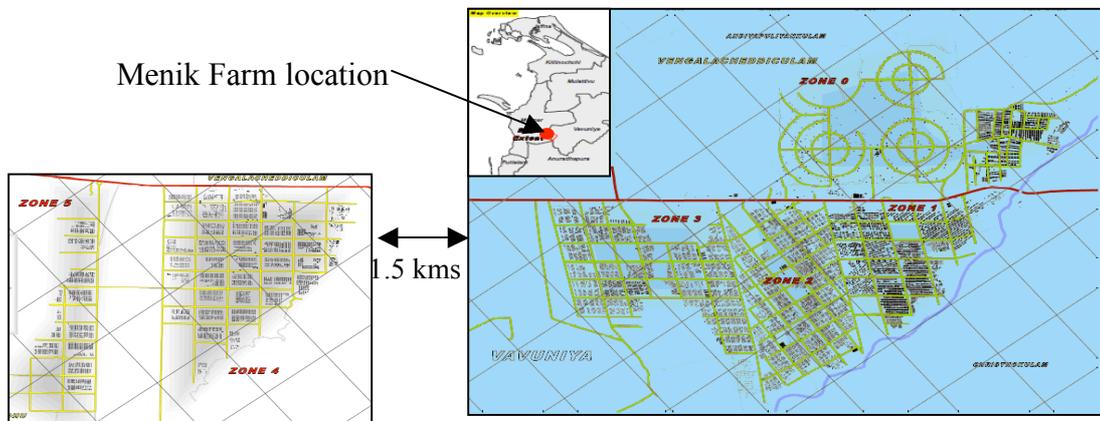


Figure
 The maps of the Menik farm based on UNOSAT maps
CE-2009-999999-LKA & CE-2009-999999-LKA

<i>Name of area</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Area in km-sq</i>	<i>Population in Menik Farm size area</i>
Jaffna city	80,000	30	2000
Colombo city	650,000	37	14,000
Menik Farm	250,000	0.8	250,000

Table

1. Introduction

A quarter million people, who have been on the run from artillery fire for more than a year, are now restricted by barbed wire inside an area less than one kilometre square. A comparison with the size of some heavily populated cities (Table) gives some idea of the congestion that is made even more acute by restricting the freedom of movement of the inmates. The scenario has drawn the attention of United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, governments of many leading countries and several other local and international NGOs, as well as all the major media. The scenario has continued for over six months and there is no end in sight despite pressures applied on and promises made by the Sri Lankan Government. The account below adds to the existing descriptions of the camp conditions and is based entirely on my first hand experience as an inmate in the zone-3 camp (Figure) for more than four months.

2. Administration

The administration of each camp named zone-0 to zone-5 is conducted by one sub office inside each zone. These sub offices in theory comes under the Assistant Government Agent Division (AGA) of Cheddikulam-Vavuniya. Each sub office has a “figure head”, a Tamil, who used to be the head of an AGA division in Vanni prior to displacement and as a rule these “figure heads” are not interned inside the camp. Scores of staff, all of them Tamils, who worked under these heads in Vanni, who are presently interned inside the camps, staff the zone sub offices and live in fear and are eager to get out just like any of the other inmates. Above each of these “zone figure heads” are another head who are all Sinhalese and are employees of the Ministry of Resettlement. The military units that support these “Sinhalese civil servant heads” work in close association with them. The Tamils inmates, “the Tamil figure head” and all other interned staff, take orders from the military.

Once when I was in the sub-office a convoy arrived with the Minister of Resettlement and several personnel with video cameras. While the minister took photographs standing in front of the sub office we, the inmates, were chased out. Then a van with video cameras drove by and started throwing bread and some “sambol” at the inmates crowded behind the office. The inmates rushed competing for the bread while the amused cameramen were videoing. Observing the scene it seemed to me that these video shots will be screened on the state television that night with the news of the minister’s visit to the camp for the pleasure of the Sinhala viewers. Inmates on many occasions have told me of seeing similar scenes being videoed.

3. Military

(“When we risked our lives to escape from the war zone we viewed the Sri Lankan army as our saviours. Just three months later we hate them and see them as “masters”- a 40 year old male inmate)

Gun and stick (long baton rods) wielding military control the inmates at all times. I have not witnessed the guns being used on inmates though I have heard guns being fired on many occasions. The sticks on the other hand were used regularly reminding me of the way black slaves were beaten in the “Roots” television drama. Being treated worse than animals is a very accurate description. The following incident is typical.

A medical employee inmate was regularly carrying some refrigerated medicines from one OPD clinic to another inside the same camp. The employee used a short cut through the tents instead of using the longer gravel road. One military duo attempted to stop the employee suspecting that he is a seller of some goods. Such sellers are treated like criminals as described later. When this employee in question failed to stop because he never suspected that the target of the military order to stop was him. The angered military duo drove their motorbike through the narrow space between the tents; brining down clothes that were hanging on strings stretched cross the tents; and endangering young children playing in that space. They reached the employee, stopped and got off the motorbike and walked angrily towards the employee shouting something in Sinhalese. The Tamil employee who does not understand Sinhalese kept repeating “hospital.. hospital”, which is a word most of the people in world would understand. (Indeed 95 percent of the inmates all of whom are Tamils do not understand Sinhalese where as 99 percent of the military all of whom are Sinhalese do

not know Tamil and give their orders as “masters” in Sinhalese which the “slaves” do not understand.) The enraged military man kicked the employee on his face and stomach several times with his boots while the employee kept repeating “hospital.. hospital”. It was only after the military man was too tired to deliver any more kicks that he stopped to look at what was in the box that the employee was carrying. Several of us witnessed this in close quarters frozen in fear. When the scene cleared I asked one senior government employee inmate if this misconduct by the military ought to be reported. I was told that if I attempt anything like that I will “disappear”.

I have on many occasions taken the trek on the gravel road from one end of the zone-3 camp to its sub-office. This gravel road also separates zone-3 and zone-2 camps. It is therefore an area where the master-slave scenario is played out frequently when the inmates of one camp attempt to go to the other through the barbed wire to meet family members and friends. Anyone caught while attempting to cross are beaten brutally and the degree of brutality became worse as the inmates appeared undeterred by the military brutality. In reality, the people were desperate to see and help family members and friends in the adjacent camp who have arrived at different times from the war zone and have lost close relatives in the war. Military brutality in such circumstance was ineffective. Though some procedure was instituted to let a limited number of people to crossover to the other camp for the day, this was ineffective and people continued to defy the military and breach the barbed wire behind its back.

4. Living area

It was obvious when we arrived in the camp that even the basics like water, toilets and tent were not in place to hold the people they are detaining. Many of us drank the water that were not meant for drinking and ended up with diarrhoea almost immediately after arrival. One could go on about the conditions at the start. There were improvements as time went by but only in comparison to what was there to start with.

The tent was unbearably hot once the sun came out but there were hardly any shade to take shelter from the sun; the place was like a desert with crowded tents. Within two months the tarpaulin material used for the tents were shredded to pieces by the strong winds that started in June. For more than a month we lived in shredded tents with no privacy at all until they were replaced. The wind during June/July was extreme and it was like living permanently in a sandstorm. Everyone was covered with sand that will come raining down every few minutes. There were a couple of heavy downpours soon after we arrived in the camp. Some of the camps in the lower lying areas were flooded. The wind that came with the downpours lifted the roofs of some of the tents. Fear of the monsoon rains was often expressed by the inmates during conversation. I had left the camp before the August heavy rains.

The toilets are only less than five meters from my tent and the smell was strong when the emptying of the toilet pits is not carried out in time which is always the case. When there is water shortage, which is frequent, concern about how one is going to use the toilet becomes the most serious problem of the day, surpassing the problems of food, health and other major issues. Queues for toilets are common in the morning but is usually not so during the day.

Each camp is divided in units of around 300 tents, averaging 2000 inmates, with most units having an enclosed bathing space for 20 people, one for males and one for females. The spacing of this bathing area is such that the water running off the bathing of one person runs into the basin containing the bathing water of the person next to them. Majority of the inmates therefore prefer to bath in the open though lacking in privacy.

I have never seen flies and mosquitoes in such numbers in my life. While eating, one hand is fully occupied with chasing the flies; a practice that children will not adopt thus consuming food contaminated by flies that come straight from the toilets very nearby. Inmates attempted with no success to keep the flies out of their tent by cutting the mosquito nets given to them and draping it around the tent. A few weeks later when mosquitoes were on the rise inmates did not have enough nets to sleep at night. Once the sun sets, one can literally sense dust falling on the face while sitting inside the tent which is in fact the swarms of mosquitoes flying around.

The camp sites are zigzagged with open canals that take away the dirty water. This is the best breeding area for the mosquitoes and the water in the canal is always covered with a thick layer of mosquitoes lying low during the daytime ready for swamping once the sun sets. These canals are always more than a meter wide and there are never adequate cross over points to walk over. Older people and young children frequently fall into these dirty canal water while jumping across it.

5. Retailers

The very first commercial event in the camp after our arrival was the bank. First came the state run banks, with loud announcements of caring for the people. This was quickly followed by other private banks. Banking advertisements were the most prolific in the camp and everyone knew that they were all competing for the savings of the war refugees now interned in terrible conditions.

The trucks of items for sale were first brought in by the Multi-Purpose-Cooperative Societies (MPCS). The struggle people went through to buy small quantities of sugar and tea were stories in their own right. The reason is the huge number of people dying to have a hot cup of tea and the tiny amounts that were brought in for sale. This situation lasted for a few months before more trucks of items for sale and more retail outlets were installed.

Other sellers came along and curiously all of these sellers were Sinhalese except for an odd Muslim seller. A large supermarket style building was erected by “Sathosa” chain to sell mostly expensive items. Ice-cream and Soda outlets were erected. Vegetable and fruit sellers came in substantive numbers. The camp inmates attempted to buy some of these items and resell it with a small profit in order to generate some income for themselves. This was banned by the military and thus was the basis for the frequent cruelty of the military against inmates. There were regular incidents where the military will scatter the wares of these inmate sellers and beat them severely. The inmates came to understand this as a deliberate effort to stop inmates making money whereas selected Sinhalese sellers were given all rights to sell what they like at the price they chose. There was always a market for these wares because the camp inmates included regular salaried people like teachers, health workers, administrative

staff etc. Most of the items brought in for sale were those that could be sold with big profit like ice-cream, soda, and biscuits. Basic needs, such as sun hats for children were not sold. Anyone who visited the camp could see very young children roaming around without a hat, one cause for the frequent illness suffered by the children. It was a profit driven retailing with no concern for the people and the inmates understood this clearly.

I was once in the zone-3 camp office when some UNHCR staff were talking to the senior Tamil staff in the office. This was at the time when zone-3 camp was moving from large scale cooking to family level cooking. WFP had started providing the basic dry items (rice, white flour, lentils, sugar and vegetable oil). The UNHCR staff inquired the Tamil officers about vegetables and they were told that Tamil officers have been instructed by the Vavuniya District Secretariat that no vegetables are to be given to inmates. This remained the case until I left the camp. The people with regular salaries could afford to buy the vegetables which were very expensive and the others, the majority just survived with the dry rations.

Majority of the children including infants did not have milk (powder) except an occasional packet handed out by some charity. Once a father of a seven month old baby came begging for some sugar to put in the plain tea (black tea) to be given to his seven month old baby because the mother did not have enough breast milk and the baby was hungry. Plain tea had become the regular diet for this baby.

The remnants of trees that were chopped to clear the forest to set up the camp were initially used by the inmates for firewood. This quickly ran out once self cooking was begun with WFP dry rations. No axes were given to the inmates to chop the wood and people could be seen going around pleading a few who had bought an axe for loan of the axe. People were forced to go to edge of camp to collect firewood and were often beaten up by mindless military personnel. Collecting firewood also thus became synonym with military brutality.

6. Health service

Each zone has two or three OPD clinics of varying sizes. Most of the doctors attending the clinics are non-Tamil speakers. Most of them are Sinhalese and sometimes Indian doctors are in attendance too; necessitating an interpreter. Skilled interpreters are rare and anyone with a minimum knowledge of Sinhala is recruited from the inmates. Older women not wishing to use the young male unskilled interpreter have approached me to explain their reproductive system related illness to the doctor in English.

The queues are very long and the doctors work at break neck speed. I have seen a doctor writing a prescription to a 12 year old boy without finding out what is wrong with the boy. The medicines that are dispensed are arranged in a table and the total list of medicines consists of around 30 different medicines. The medicine dispensers too work with breakneck speed in dispensing them. Once an educated mother told me that she visited the doctor for treatment for her baby as well as for herself. The medicine dispensers mixed up the medicines and gave the baby what should have been given to the mother. Since the mother had some awareness of the medications she spotted it. Most mothers in the camp who do not have such awareness would have given the

adult medicine to the baby. God only knows how many babies, children and even adults died due such medical negligence. Who is there in the camp to watch, monitor and investigate? Deaths are just that, deaths and no investigations are done as to the cause of it.

Patients often queue up for doctors for hours even before the doctors arrive from outside. No one in the OPD clinic will know when the doctors are likely to arrive. One just waits around taking one's chances. For all this the level of sickness among inmates is far higher than among the population at large and it is obvious.

Take the eight tent group where I was staying. Five of the tents out of the eight had children under 10. One child died; one became seriously ill and taken away to Vavuniya hospital and all the other children had frequent fever, vomiting and diarrhoea. The children were wasting away and it was visibly obvious. Some of the children had persistent skin disease despite several visits to the doctors and treatment. Four of the children contracted HepatitisA and the parents were told by the doctors to just take good care of them and give lots of fruits because the hospitals had no medicine. Fruits were very expensive in the camp. There is a native treatment for HepatitisA involving a plant named "Keelkainelli" in Tamil. Even to get this plant was a struggle because it meant someone has to bring it from outside and handover to the inmates at the meeting spot as described later.

People young and old suddenly dying after a few days of fever is a common occurrence. All of us were left puzzled as to the cause and no one gave any explanation. All of us without exception have suffered diarrhoea at least once and most of us many times.

I used to keep telling myself during the stay in the camp how lucky I was that I do not have any young children under my care. The unhygienic living, especially the play area and the continuous illness is an ordeal for the young mothers. Even thinking about the condition of newborns and their mothers who are sent back to the camp conditions soon after birth is an ordeal. Perhaps the most telling scenes of the camp conditions and the health service can be found by visiting the OPD clinics and observing young mothers with very sick babies waiting for long time in queues with tears trickling down their face.

7. Family separation

Family separation caused by many factors is yet another ordeal that runs through the community. Contacting family living elsewhere also became an ordeal because most people have lost the addresses and phone numbers during the escape. Until after May, the camp postal service was non-existent and the camp phone service that permitted a three-minute call required standing in queues for two days; most of the time without success. Possessing a mobile phone was a crime and remained a crime until the time I left the camp. For a short period during July the military was even confiscating radios because of the rumour that the Voice of Tiger radio service had restarted.

Hundreds of injured people were taken by ICRC ship throughout the war period from Vanni. Often an adult family member and sometimes young children who had no other care giver left in Vanni accompanied the injured. The injured person and the

accompanying family members were separated within a day or two of arrival and the family members were taken to the camps while the injured was sent away to some hospital. I have known family after family desperately trying without much assistance from any authorities to locate the injured family member who could have been transferred to any number of the hospitals. Many a tearful months were spent by these families not knowing anything about the fate of their injured family member. Reunion of the injured with the family in many cases took place purely by the efforts of the family with next to no help from the authorities.

The war conditions and the eventual escape from the war zone separated families. Often while escaping part of the family would cross over while the others failed to cross over. Again many families wrote dozens of letters and made many tearful trips to the sub-office trying to locate the missing members. The success often came by sheer luck and not through any set procedure. It was chaos all around. The most heartbreaking scenes prior to June was when bus loads of refugees were just arriving in the camps. People in the camps would run behind these buses hoping to catch a glimpse of a missing relative. If someone in the bus waves at them, there would be endless speculation on to whom the wave was directed and who that person was. These were all signs of longing that the family members who were not already in the camp had survived and made it across.

It is these people suffering intense anxieties about friends and families who were brutally stopped by the military from entering adjacent camps to check out if the missing loved one has arrived there. The number of times inmates were brutally beaten when caught attempting to cross is countless. The camps were full of stories on how even women were beaten up. Walking down the gravel road that separates zone-2 and zone-3 one can see the barbed wire being breached at several places where the determined people have made spaces to crossover. The military would at gunpoint gather young men to mend these breached places and the people kept breaching them again and again. Once I saw an old man just squatting on the zone-3 side of the gravel road watching through the barbed wire the goings on in zone-2. A military person walking past called the old man on to the road and started beating him. It was clear to me that the beating on this occasion was purely for sadistic pleasure. I have seen a few more instances of sadistic actions by the military. The beating of the hospital worker described earlier also was of this category.

The military also separated families by taking away people suspected of LTTE membership at Omanthai where all refugees were first recorded. Trying to locate the whereabouts of such members was the most traumatic. In many cases families did not even know if the member had perished in Vanni or were taken away by the military. ICRC played a part in giving information to the families whenever it managed to find out the whereabouts of the missing person. If the names are not in ICRC list then locating such cases is impossible. Many families were still searching for members in this category when I left.

If there was any doubt that the Menik Farm camps are anything other than prisons the procedure in place for outside visitors to meet inmates will clear away any doubt. Each zone has a space allocated where outsiders must come to seek face to face meeting with inmates. There were times when they were barred from bringing anything to be given to the inmates. This was relaxed later. The visitor gives a piece of paper to

the personnel manning the place with the names of the inmates they wish to meet. This will be announced in the public announcement system. Mind you, not every tent is within the audible limits of this announcement system. By the time the inmate hears the announcement and takes the long trek to the meeting place anything from one to two hours would have passed. Across a divide separated by barbed wires the inmates and visitors must identify and signal to each other that they will enter the meeting area on the next turn. A fixed number of inmates (around 50 in zone-3) are permitted into the meeting area at a time and their corresponding visitors are also then permitted in. The actual meeting area is divided by iron sheets up to the chest and above it are wooden grills similar to what one would find in a prison. The visitors and inmates can talk through this grill and also exchange items over the grill. One is permitted only around 20 minutes maximum to talk because there will be hundreds more waiting. Even within this short time one is often interrupted by the military demanding the national identity card of the visitor and details about the relationship to the inmate. The waiting area for the zone-3 visitors has no shade and they will be waiting in the burning sun for hours.

8. Deaths

If an inmate dies in a hospital outside camp to which the inmate was transferred earlier, there is a small chance he or she will get something resembling a funeral. Of course there must be a relative who is a permanent resident of Vavuniya who is willing to hold the funeral in their home. If this is the scenario then only three relatives from inside the camp are permitted to leave the camp to attend the funeral. A police person is sent with them and the very next day this police person must ensure that the inmates are back in camp. A three and a half year old boy died near my tent and his aunts who brought him up were not allowed to even go and see the dead body of the boy. Any death within the camp has no chance of a funeral. The body is just removed by the military and nothing is heard of after that.

Even in death families have no privacy to mourn. While people close to the deceased mourned onlookers would gather around because it all had to be done in the open space.

9. Mysterious happenings

Once there were rumours of three to six bodies of young women floating in the river adjacent to the camp. There were speculations as to the reasons for the presence of these bodies. There were rumours of white-van abductions within the camp. There were also stories of a young man disappearing while going to collect water. We were not treated like people with intelligence who deserve to find out what is going on. There were only rumours based on such facts and no way of finding out anything else.

There were these people whom the camp inmates called 'CIDs'. They were apparently senior LTTE members who had been taken away and then "released" into the camp to be with their families. Their job is to spot LTTE members and LTTE Police members who have not reported to the military. One such CID man was living close to my tent. I have seen him interrogating other men suspected of close liaison with LTTE. This CID man has apparently said that he is doing this after he was beaten severely until he agreed to do this task. We also heard another well known

female LTTE member coming in Sri Lankan military uniform to the camps and identifying LTTE members in the camp.

10. What inmates talked about

Until end of May, till the last of the displaced arrived, most people talked a lot about who were killed since they had left. Stories of entire families being killed were common in the conversations of the inmates. Especially when extended families or people from the same locality met for the first time since getting out of the war zone, they had numerous stories to share about the fate of the unfortunate relatives and villagers. How best to trace missing relatives was always part of this topic of conversation. Descriptions of the experience of crossing over from the war zone were the ones described in minute details by those who had displaced in March. While crossing over people faced intense fears of being shot at either by the military or by the LTTE. Families often got separated when they were fired at. Wealthier people hired boats to cross over. One mother lost all of her four children when her boat was fired at by the military suspecting it to be an LTTE boat.

Those who arrived in May described the experience of the last few days of the war in great detail. Many said that during the last few days they never walked erect due to fear of being hit by shelling. When making the move to exit the area they said that they had to walk over dead bodies.

Other topics included the amount of money they had wasted in transporting their possessions as they displaced again and again in Vanni. The loss of their entire possessions was acutely felt and discussed over and over again. When feeling a little less tense the inmates never tire of describing their yard and all the trees and vegetables that would be growing in their yard. The soothing shades of large mango and jack trees in their yard were frequently remembered and contrasted with the lack of shade from the scorching sun in the camp.

The going on in the camp itself also dominated the conversation of inmates who were living near each other. The most common topic is the fights among inmates that always took place at the water collection queues. These fights indicative of the tension caused by competition for the limited availability of water created a very bad atmosphere among the inmates who were otherwise very amicable and helpful to each other.