

Children of Sri Lankan refugees born in India uncertain about future



Most men at the refugee camp in Keezhpudhupattu have only worked as daily wage earners throughout their lives. (Shuchi Kapoor/For The Washington Post)

• Asia &

By Annie Gowen Pacific

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KEEZHPUDHUPATTU, India – The election of a new president in Sri Lanka in January ushered in renewed hopes for the return of thousands of ethnic Tamils displaced by war – and uncertainty for their children born abroad during decades of bloody conflict.

Many of the children are in their twenties now and have spent their entire lives in refugee camps in southern India. Their parents tried to shield them from the worst stories of their terrifying exodus during Sri Lanka’s civil war. And so they have lived their heritage in fragments: the snatches of slang their elders use. Matches of kilithattu, Sri Lanka’s tag-like game. Breakfasts of steamed rice flour and coconut curry.

“Sri Lanka for me, to be honest, is more than anything else, just a distant island,” said Prasanth Sekar, 21, an engineering student. “My mum and dad say that it was a great place and that it was much better than where we are now. Snake gourd, any vegetable that you can think of, was richer there. But that’s just what they say; I myself don’t really know.”

In recent weeks, as news unfolded on Facebook and through WhatsApp messages, Sekar and the other young adults at Keezhpudhupattu camp have come to realize that, after years of living in limbo, their lives could change dramatically in the coming months.

Sri Lanka’s new president, Maithripala Sirisena, has pledged greater reconciliation with the Tamils from the country’s war-torn northeast. Last month, his administration began talks with the Indian government about a formal plan for repatriating the 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees still in India, who began coming in waves as violence rocked their

homeland in 1983. About 64,000 still live in more than 100 camps in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.



At the camp, a woman prepares lunch over a clay stove in her one-room house provided by the government of India. (Shuchi Kapoor/For The Washington Post)

The Keezhpudhupattu camp was built in 1990 as a temporary shelter. It now looks like a typical Indian village — dusty lanes, small shops and bougainvillea trailing the walls of tiny cement houses, where occupants have built additions to make room for refrigerators and televisions. Its 800 families receive a small monthly stipend, free rice, free housing, free electricity and free education for their children from the Indian government. But, for now, they have little hope of becoming Indian citizens.

Sri Lanka — the lush, tropical island that hangs like a teardrop off India's southern tip — has suffered ethnic tension between Buddhist majority Sinhalese and Hindu-minority Tamils for decades, strife that deepened into civil war in the 1980s.

India's history in the conflict is fraught. Indian soldiers led a peacekeeping mission to the country in the late 1980s, which angered the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who carried out a suicide attack that killed India's former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991. During the tense years that followed, some Sri Lankan refugees felt pressured to return home until India adopted a policy of voluntary return in 1996. The LTTE was designated as a foreign terror group by the United States in 1997.

After years of civil war and alleged atrocities by both sides, the government of Sri Lanka's former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, [defeated separatist forces in 2009](#).

Despite the Rajapaksa administration's efforts to rebuild the northeast, refugees said that they still did not feel safe returning, because the area was still heavily militarized and much of the land seized from the Tamils had not been returned.

Nearly 70 percent of refugees in a recent survey by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai said they did not want to return to Sri Lanka.

"The concern at the time was that things were not very conducive for them to return back home," said K.M. Parivelan, an associate professor at the institute and author of the study. "There was no clear picture of the benefits they will get when they get back and how they will restart their lives." But, he added, "Now that the election has happened and there is a new government, things are more hopeful."

An uncertain future for children of Sri Lankan refugees



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The election of a new president brings hopes of repatriation for those who have lived in camps all their lives.

Government officials and refugee groups say it is far too soon to tell what will be different for the Tamils under a Sirisena administration. Sirisena, who is also ethnically Sinhalese, was supported by the Tamils and other minority groups in [his upset victory](#) over Rajapaksa in January. Sirisena has pledged to begin returning land seized by the military, investigate war crimes and repatriate displaced Tamils. The release of a United Nations human rights report on alleged crimes was recently delayed for further study.

On [Jan. 30](#), Indian and Sri Lankan officials met in New Delhi to begin formulating a plan to repatriate the refugees. Officials from the state government, which administers the camps, opted not to participate, labeling the talks “premature.”

Representatives of the refugee group Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation have formulated their own repatriation proposal, which includes a package of travel costs, land and housing and subsistence of about \$1,500 over three years. They’re also doing an outreach program explaining return to refugees in camps, linking them to Tamils living in Sri Lanka by Skype.

“The life of the refugee is agony,” said the founder of the group, S.C. Chandrahasan. “We don’t say it loud. You’re no one and belong to nowhere. For years it has gone on like this, and we don’t want it to continue.”

One recent day at Keezhpudhupattu, Sekar gathered with family and friends in the modest front room of their house. Two songbirds sang in cages. His sister, Nagapriya, 22, a nurse, fed the family parrot a red pepper. The family has lived in the camp since 1990, when the elder Sekar and his wife fled Sri Lanka after the rebels tried to recruit him into their organization. They eventually opened a small store and saved enough money to send all their children to school.

Sekar and the other young adults spend their time tutoring children, playing cricket and volleyball, and scraping a few rupees together for dinner at nearby restaurants. These days, they have been talking a lot more about their future.

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Sekar's friend, Loganathan Bala, 20, a computer student, said he was torn, feeling neither Indian nor Sri Lankan.

"I'm mixed. On the one hand, I want to go back there; but on the other, I have no interest," Bala said. "In my heart, I want to go and see the land, how it is, but the problems there make me wonder why we should go back."

Sekar says he does not want to return, even though his lack of citizenship will hurt him when he graduates from college, where he is working toward a degree in aeronautical engineering.

"To be honest, I'm scared about my future," Sekar said. "I suppose I could get a private job, but the fact that I'm a refugee will always be held against me. People won't believe us. I can't say I'm Indian even though I feel like this is my place."

Pramila Krishnan contributed to this report.

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Annie Gowen is The Post's India bureau chief and has reported for the Post throughout South Asia and the Middle East.

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