

Priests detained in Sri Lanka refugee camps

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JAFFNA, Sri Lanka

Five Tamil Catholic priests who were trapped in the war zone remain detained in refugee camps in northern Sri Lanka.

Bishop Thomas Savundaranayagam of Jaffna confirms this. "They were rescued by the military from the war zone," he told UCA News on June 1. "They worked for the people. They should be sent to Jaffna."

The bishop said he had written to the Ministry of Defense five days earlier asking for the release of the priests. He added that Catholics in general as well as parents of the detained priests are concerned and shocked by the situation.

His secretary, Father Genolton Vijintus Rajanayagam, expressed similar concern: "We are in the dark about what our priests are doing in the camps."

The five priests remain in Vavuniya, the site of four relief camps and a former gateway to the northern war zone.

NGO workers report epidemics of chicken pox and skin diseases, and a growing number of hepatitis cases in the camps. "(Aid) agencies cannot adequately provide urgently needed services including food and water," an NGO staff member said, preferring not to be identified.

The Sri Lankan government claimed victory in the 25-year civil war with separatist Tamil rebels following three months of bitter fighting in the north that saw many civilians trapped in the war zone. About 300,000 civilians who fled the war are now housed in refugee camps in Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya and Trincomalee. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared the end of the war in parliament on May 19.

Jaffna diocese bore the brunt of the heaviest fighting, and the Church here has suffered "heavy loss," said Father Rajanayagam.

Reports reaching the Jaffna Bishop's House say 16 parishes in two deaneries of the diocese were abandoned during the fighting, and hundreds of Church workers were killed or wounded. Convents and charity centers for children and the elderly were also reported damaged.

Priests and Religious are among the many dead, missing or wounded. Reports say a 70-year-old priest, Father Francis Joseph, has been missing since the final battle.

According to sources for one church in the diocese, nine priests and a nun were injured.

Father James Pathinathar, parish priest in Mullaitivu, is recovering from wounds, and Father T.R. Vasanthaseelan, assistant director of the diocese's social-service agency, Caritas-Jaffna, is waiting for an artificial leg after losing a limb in an artillery attack on April 23.

"Terrifying" was the word Father Justin B. Gnanapragasam, Jaffna diocese's vicar general, used to describe the situation.

He cited the death of Father Mariampillai T. Sarathjeevan, who was rescued by state forces along with the last batch of some 30,000 civilians caught up in the battle zone, but died of a heart attack on May 18.

An urn containing the ashes of the Tamil priest was buried on May 30 at the Jaffna Catholic cemetery, among the remains of thousands of other war victims. Hundreds of priests, Religious and laypeople paid their last respects. The 41-year-old parish priest in Uruthrapuram, a farming village in the war zone, fled only when the people did.

"Such a courageous priest remained with the people until the last day of the war," exclaimed Genard Savarimuthu, an elderly mourner.

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