

SRI LANKA

Paying the pathfinder

It is the end of the school day, and as the sun sets a group of teenaged girls wander along the dusty track which winds between great bursts of purple bougainvillea. They laugh as they clutch their school books, but it is a childish enthusiasm which distracts them from the grim fact that they are not going home, but to a crowded camp for people displaced by fighting.

Irregular reports from artillery thump the sky. We ask them to talk for a few moments, and their expressions become oddly creased in a way that makes them suddenly adult, living in a world full of worries. They've been in this camp for almost a year now. Are they still scared by the sound of guns? They nod, but say that they are used to it now, because "you can get used to anything."

This picture is a still moment amidst the frantic activity which has seized eastern Sri Lanka. The slow influx of people fleeing fighting over the past year has become a rush. Hundreds of civilians each day have become thousands, and now tens of thousands, picking their way through paths, across rivers, to the relative safety of camps which lie in government-held territory.

Sithan, 67, is from Trincomalee District and arrived a week ago. His encounters with authority have cost him a straight back and the crippled hand with which he grips the shoulder of his 10-year-old daughter Danushika. It's difficult to imagine this professional accountant who speaks so softly and carefully surviving four years in prison, let alone his epic story of the past year.

His journey to this point is similar to most in the camps. He has moved almost a dozen times in the past 11 months, walking hundreds of kilometres to escape the shelling as the conflict between Government forces and the Tamil Tigers shifted. Whenever it came too close, his wife and daughter would gather their few belongings and begin a new flight.

This bent old man would urge his young daughter on, wading across rivers which almost took them away, encountering others in the forests in search of sanctuary, sharing snatches of information that might save their lives, and trying to ignore and be ignored by armed groups they came across. He paid 'professional pathfinders' around 50 cents to lead him and his family through minefields. Accountant and pathfinder, each person trying to adapt to a chaotic world!

This camp, which lies 17 km to the north of the town of Batticaloa, holds around 1,300 people, with more arriving each day. They've come in waves. First in April 2006, like the schoolgirls, then in December, again in January, and suddenly

many more recently. There are 90 camps at last count in Batticaloa District, holding 130,000 IDPs. Since 10 March 2007, 60,000 people have swollen the camp population by more than a third, putting humanitarian agencies, like UNICEF, under enormous pressure.

Reka, 24, and her son Anushan, 7, are newcomers to the world of displacement. For two days and nights artillery explosions tore the forest and fields close to their village, and her son pleaded with her to take him away to a place without shelling and the fighter jets that menaced above. But she had no idea where to go, an objection discarded in minutes early one morning when a shell destroyed the house next door. The 40 families of the village grabbed a few clothes, and ran into the forest towards government lines. They crossed a river by boat, and in the forests they crept forward, watching other families from other villagers move before they went on themselves, reaching this camp after trekking for 18 hours.

UNICEF and other humanitarian actors (including the host communities) are providing food, medicines, latrines, water supplies, shelter, clothes, school supplies, and household utensils. Play areas for children are being established, and where children cannot attend school because of lack of space, temporary learning structures have been established.

The IDPs were sure about one thing: because of lawlessness and fighting, they do not consider it safe to return to their homes until there is peace. "To be led through the minefield is like a door closing," says Sithan. "It will be very difficult to return home, without a guarantee of safety and the rule of law."