

## Resettlement of Northern Muslims: A Post-War Development Challenge in Sri Lanka

Mohammad Agus Yusoff<sup>1</sup>, Athambawa Sarjoon<sup>2\*</sup>, & Azmi Awang<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>History, Politics and Security Research Center, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM Bangi-43000, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: [agus@ukm.edu.my](mailto:agus@ukm.edu.my)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya 20400, Sri Lanka. Email: [sarjoona@gmail.com](mailto:sarjoona@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Road Transport Department Malaysia, Putrajaya, Malaysia. Email: [azmi@ipj.gov.my](mailto:azmi@ipj.gov.my)

\*Corresponding author

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The success and sustainability of any type of post-war development and reconciliation process is highly dependent on its successful mechanism to accommodate the concerns and grievances of all affected parties. It also urges ensuring equity to all affected parties during these processes. However, Sri Lanka's post-war development and reconciliation process has poorly accommodated many concerns of its ethnic minorities, particularly the Muslims of the northern province. The resettlement of the forcefully evacuated northern Muslims has continued to be a marginalized subject in the post-war development and reconciliation contexts in Sri Lanka. The primary objective of this study is to review the forceful eviction of northern Muslims in the civil war context, and to examine the nature and the issues of their resettlement in the post-war context. There are number of studies in the related literature that focused on the resettlement of internally displaced people due to violent ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka. However, the majority of them mainly have focused on the displacement and refugee life of Tamils and their resettlement. There are also several studies that focused on the displacement and the resettlement of northern Muslims. The majority of these studies, however, have mainly focused on economic and social perspectives of their refugee life, i.e., on the issues pertaining to their refugee life in the temporary settlements, relationship with host communities and the related issues. Prior studies have very rarely focused on the development, post-war development and the ethnic reconciliation perspectives of the resettlement of the northern Muslims. This study attempts to fill this gap by addressing the development oriented and ethnic reconciliation-related issues and challenges in resettling the forcefully evicted northern Muslims to their traditional homelands.

**Key Words:** Ethnic conflict, forceful eviction, northern Muslims, post-war development & resettlement, Sri Lanka

## Methodology

This study has employed both primary and secondary data collected from independent sources. The primary data were collected from personal communications with the identified respondents using purposive sampling, who have previously worked on the subject area, and have become familiarized with the issues of displacement and resettlement. Journal articles, newspapers, reports of government authorities and nongovernmental organizations were the major secondary sources that helped to find the historical backgrounds, and the process and latest status of the resettlement of northern Muslims and other related issues. These data were analyzed and presented in the full paper through a descriptive and interpretive lens.

## Results and Discussions

The Muslim community in the northern province formed 5.3 percent of the provincial population, according to 1981 census. When they were forcefully evicted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main rebel group fought for the self-determination right of the Tamils in October 1990, the Muslim population was estimated to be at 80,000 to 100,000. Their number has now swelled to about 250,000, according to several sources. However, only less than 50,000 have now returned to their traditional villages. The remaining are living outside the northern province, mainly in the Puttalam, Kurunegala, Anuradepura, Vavuniya and Colombo districts. They have faced many challenging problems throughout their daily lives.

The findings of the study reveal that, although the forceful eviction of these Muslims was inhumane, no due recognition was given to them by the major parties in the conflict and settlement process. The Muslim community had been living peacefully in the province for centuries with their fellow Tamil-speaking Tamils, and had close relationships and ties in terms of socio-cultural, economic and political activities. Therefore, the eviction of the northern Muslims is hardly justifiable. But, it took many years for the Tamil militant groups and political forces to acknowledge their sympathy towards the evicted Muslims.

This study has found that the resettlement of the northern Muslims to their traditional homelands has been challenged over the past 25 years, attributable to a number of influencing factors: the nature of their displacement (protracted), lack of strategy and plans from government authorities, lack of political commitment and public support from Tamil community, oppositions from nationalist forces, and the lack of the power of Muslim minority politicians. Although the government authorities have implemented several programs to facilitate the resettlement of the hundreds of thousands internally displaced and forcefully evicted people in the north-eastern region during and after the civil war, these authorities have failed to develop a comprehensive resettlement plan to permanently resettle the Muslim community of the northern province. The relief, resettlement and rehabilitation programs in the post-civil war context in Sri Lanka have received international recognition, but these programs have also failed to accommodate the permanent resettlement of the northern Muslims.

The resettlement of the northern Muslims was also challenged due to the lack of public and political support from other ethnic groups and major political forces. The major ethnic group of the northern province, the Tamils, did not extend sufficient support to the resettlement program until the active presence of the LTTE. It took many years for the LTTE to honestly recall the evicted Muslims. From 2012 onwards, a democratically elected provincial government has been functioning in the northern province, and it has also been actively advocating for the land rights and the resettlement of Tamils affected by the ethnic conflict and civil war, but no meaningful initiative has been taken by the provincial government run by the major Tamil party, the TNA, towards the permanent resettlement of the evicted northern Muslims. Similarly, whenever the government authorities and the Muslim ministers attempt to resettle these Muslims, the nationalist forces among the Sinhalese have continued to express their strong opposition and anti-Muslim campaigns, spreading ideas about Muslims destroying the nation's wild resources and trying to own state lands illegally.

On the other hand, the permanent resettlement of the northern Muslims has also been challenged due to the inability of Muslim politics. There were number of Muslim parliamentarians and cabinet ministers at the time of forceful eviction of this community in 1990, and the SLMC and other Muslim political parties, have strongly supported the successive central governments, however, Muslim politicians were unable to convince the government authorities to permanently resettle the evicted Muslims. The initiatives undertaken by the Muslim ministers were criticized or poorly supported by other Muslims ministers and parliamentarians. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the present status of displaced life and resettlement of northern Muslims was mostly facilitated by political patronage and the strength of representative politics of Muslims with the major national political forces.

All the above identified factors have challenged these vulnerable Muslims to fight for their due status, justice and relief in terms of their forceful eviction and permanent resettlement. In many occasions, the legal status of their displacement was also challenged. Similarly, their rights to return to their homelands, and the right to compensation have also been questioned due to the nature of their displacement (protracted), and the lack of a policy framework. In the post-war development and resettlement initiatives, their interests and concerns received poor attention by the government authorities and international actors.

However, this study found that the permanent and complete resettlement of the northern Muslims has been a complex issue that remains to be interconnected to several independent factors. Although there are oppositions and challenges for their resettlement by ethnic majorities, political parties and nationalist forces, the resettlement itself is challenged by the lack of willingness by the community. Since the second generation of the displaced people and the new comers in their extended families have strong affiliations in the host communities, they express less willingness to return to their ancestors' homeland, and to leave their established accommodations and their livelihood activities. These new families have also faced status issues as to accommodate in the resettlement schemes. On the other hand, there are land-related issues that limit opportunities for building new permanent houses for the resettled families and for the new families expecting to resettle. Ownership of their residential and livelihood lands is also a serious issue in the resettlement process. A clear policy

---

decision is highly needed in accommodating the new families in the permanent resettlement process of northern Muslims.

Reconciliation refers to reconciling the grievances of all affected parties. The northern Muslims were also victimized by the ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka. Therefore, returning to their traditional homeland is their right. Their resettlement will lead to reconcile their grievances and the loss due to the civil war. They are also part of the Sri Lankan society, and have co-existed with the other ethnic groups for centuries. Until their complete resettlement in their traditional homelands, the post-war development and reconciliation process would be incomplete. Therefore, addressing their interests and concerns is a precondition for the success and sustainability of post-war development and settlement drives in Sri Lanka.

### Conclusion

The end of civil war in May 2009 brought with it new hope for the permanent resettlement of the forcefully evicted northern Muslims. However, the Sri Lankan government and the international community less prioritized the resettlement and rehabilitation of the internally displaced northern Muslims 25 years ago. The northern Muslims records the longest-living internally displaced community in the country. Therefore, in the post-war development and reconciliation context, the issues related to their permanent resettlement must also be given due consideration by the government authorities, political and civil actors and the international community. Government authorities must investigate the issues pertaining to the permanent resettlement of these Muslims, and must frame longterm policies and programs short out them. Not only their forceful eviction, but also the delay in their permanent resettlement with compensations to their loss, is also a violation of their rights to live in their traditional homelands. Their permanent resettlement will reconcile their war-related grievances, and integrate them with other major ethnic groups in the country. The continued negligence of their resettlement will also challenge the sustainability of the post-war development and the ethnic reconciliation process.

Protection and promotion of all victims, irrespective of their ethnic or religious and regional affiliation is a pre-condition to ensure the sustainability of any post-war development and reconciliation process.