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Resettlement of Northern Muslims: A Challenge for Sustainable Post-War Development and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This study drew on important insights from a quarter-century history of forcefully evicted Muslims in Sri Lanka's northern province by examining the nature of their displaced life and their permanent resettlement in their traditional villages, particularly in the post-civil war context. Reviewing the literature and primary sources, this paper argues that the forceful eviction of northern Muslims was unfortunate and the persistent sidetracking of their permanent resettlement violated their right to live in their traditional villages. Successive governments have failed to propose a sustainable mechanism to resettle these Muslims as part of the resettlement plans. Post-war resettlement initiatives hardly considered the permanent resettlement of these Muslims in their traditional villages. In addition, the issue of resettling northern Muslims became highly contested due to lack of proper policies and plans of the government authorities, as well as moral and institutional support from the Tamil community and their polity, opposition, and criticisms from the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist forces, and fragmentation within Muslim politics, together with the protracted nature of the displacement. This study suggested that the continued neglect of their resettlement would challenge the sustainability of post-war development and ethnic reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: ethnic conflict; northern Muslims; forceful eviction; post-war resettlement; development; Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

One of the most cited and protracted civil wars in Asia came to an end with the military victory of Sri Lankan forces against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE was a rebel force that fought for the liberation of Tamils in the hope of establishing a Tamil-dominated state in north-eastern Sri Lanka. The three-decades-old civil war displaced over half a million people and killed thousands of innocent civilians, particularly during its final stage (2006–2009). Nevertheless, within a short period, the Sri Lankan government authorities were able to resettle most of these displaced people with limited external support, except for a few thousand families. Normalcy was restored in the war-torn north-eastern region together with infrastructure facilities and livelihood opportunities improved (Yusoff et al. 2015). However, the government's post-war resettlement and development initiatives were seriously challenged by internal and external oppositions and challenges.

The allegations made by the international Tamil diaspora community on human rights violation and killing of innocent civilians during the last stage of civil war by the military forces were the major

issues that brought the Sri Lankan government under international pressure for war-related human rights violations (Yusoff and Sarjoon 2016; Yusoff et al. 2015). Serious shortcomings in the post-civil war resettlement to a certain extent challenged the expected outcomes of the process. Among the highly noticeable shortcomings was the resettlement of forcefully evicted northern Muslims at the peak civil war in 1990. Although the end of the civil war created high hopes among the northern Muslims that their displacement would come to an end and they would be able to return to their traditional villages, no concrete plan or program was initiated by successive post-war governments. These displaced Muslims have voiced their grave concerns and wanted the government to recognize their displaced status and facilitate their return and resettlement in their traditional villages. However, the authorities continued to neglect these issues.

This study attempts to draw the important aspects of the 27-year history of the forcefully evicted northern Muslims and examine the nature and the challenges pertaining to their permanent resettlement in their traditional villages, particularly in the post-civil war context. This study found that the northern Muslims are a vulnerable and mostly marginalized community victimized by the ethnic conflict, civil war, and post-civil war development in Sri Lanka. Many countries facing civil and post-civil war challenges have successfully launched initiatives for post-war relief, recovery, and resettlement. However, the case of the northern Muslims after the civil war in Sri Lanka remains a story of failure that undermined international recognition and sustainability of Sri Lanka's post-war resettlement. This study aims to evaluate the resettlement process of forcefully evicted northern Muslims in Sri Lanka's post-war development and ethnic reconciliation initiatives.

Studies have focused on the resettlement of internally displaced people (IDP) due to violent ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka (see Saparamadu and Lall 2014; Fernando et al. 2009). However, the majority of them have emphasized the displacement and refugee life of Tamils and their resettlement. Several studies have reported the concerns and grievances associated with the displacement and resettlement of northern Muslims (Haniffa 2014; Imtiyaz and Iqbal 2011; Badurdeen 2010; Brun 2009; Shukla 2009; Thalayasingam 2009). However, most studies have focused on the economic and social perspectives of refugee life, such as issues pertaining to their life in temporary settlements and their relationship with host communities, among others. Early studies have rarely explored the development, post-war development, and ethnic reconciliation dimensions of their resettlement. This study attempts to fill this research gap by addressing development-oriented and ethnic reconciliation-related issues and challenges in resettling the forcefully evicted northern Muslims in their traditional villages.

2. Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and has used primary and secondary data for analysis. Books, journal articles, newspaper cuttings, and reports from government, non-governmental and international organizations were the major secondary sources used to assess the historical background, status, and other issues related to the displacement and resettlement of northern Muslims. Interviews, personal communication, and focus group discussions (FGDs) were the major sources of primary data. The interviews and personal communication were conducted with respondents identified through purposive sampling among political activists (5), educationists (6), civil actors (8), media personnel (2), and the public (9). These respondents were selected based on their previous work experience in the subject area or because of their familiarity with the issues of displacement and resettlement. Most of the respondents were from the Muslim community due to the lack of a Tamil population that serves as a host community in Puttalam district. The Tamils' opinions, however, were obtained through personal communications with civil activists (3) from Jaffna district. Primary data were also collected from three FGDs conducted mainly in Puttalam district, where most of the displaced northern Muslims are still living in temporary settlements and with host communities. As a result of many constraints, this study could not incorporate field visits to resettlement villages in the northern province, but incorporated the perspectives and challenges face by the Muslims who

returned to their traditional villages. The field visits for interviews and FGDs were organized for a six-month period starting from July 2017 to January 2018.

The findings of this study are presented as discussions, quotations, summaries, description, and interpretative arguments developed by reviewing and analyzing the abovementioned sources. However, for ethical reasons, this paper maintains the anonymity of informants. The discussion in this paper is largely connected to the major variables, which influence the resettlement of northern Muslims in the post-civil war context. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 3 summarizes the major findings of this study in different thematic sub-topics. This section examines the trends of displacement and resettlement throughout the course of the civil war in Sri Lanka in general and reviews the forceful eviction of northern Muslims, their displaced life in host communities, and initiatives for resettlement in their traditional villages. Apart from reviewing the post-war resettlement process, this section examines the major factors that challenge the resettlement of northern Muslims in the post-civil war context. Section 4 discusses the variables that challenge the northern Muslims' resettlement process from different angles. Section 5 summarizes the major findings of the study and presents recommendations.

3. Major Findings

The ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka have affected the Muslim community, particularly those living with other communities in the north-eastern region, in different ways, although these Muslims were not combatants in the civil war. The effects ranged from killing, forceful eviction, displacement, and loss of property, livelihood, and land to socio-cultural and psychological issues. The forceful eviction of Muslims from the northern province had disastrous impact and is a harsh reminder of the history of ethnic conflict and civil war in the country. The expulsion of these Muslims is generally considered the origin of IDP problems in Sri Lanka. In Muslim history, this event has been identified and remembered as a type of "ethnic cleansing" and a violation of their rights to live in their traditional villages. The resettlement of these Muslims has been highly ignored by successive governments. Although the post-civil war resettlement and development initiatives are success stories and viewed as examples for many similar countries, the permanent return and resettlement of northern Muslims in their traditional villages remain unsuccessful, as confirmed in this study. The major findings of this study are presented under the following thematic sub-topics.

3.1. Brief Note on Civil War Displacement and Post-War Resettlement and Development in Sri Lanka

The protracted nature of the civil war in Sri Lanka (1983–2009) caused many human displacements internally and externally. In many phases of the civil war, thousands of families living mainly in the villages in the north-eastern region and the region's border villages opted or were forced to leave their homes and head to safe areas due to intense military conflicts between the government forces and the LTTE fighters. The displacements were further worsened by the race to extend the territorial control by competing forces in the war zones. The second half of the 1980s up to the 1990s saw an increase in the number of displacements in the north-eastern region. The displacements were mostly temporary in nature, except for a few cases.

IDMC (Internal Displacement and Monitoring Center) found that since mid-2006 until September 2007, a dramatic escalation in the civil war between Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE resulted in over 4000 deaths and the displacement of thousands of people. By the end of 2006, at least 520,000 people were victims of conflict-induced displacement in a country with a population of 20 million, which made the event one of the largest displacement crises in South Asia in absolute terms and in proportion of the displaced population. Over 300,000 people were displaced in the offensive from 2006 onwards, with Tamil and Muslim minorities in the districts of Batticaloa, Trincomalee, and Jaffna being the most affected groups. The Muslim community, roughly 60,000 residents of Muttur, Toppur, and surrounding villages, were forcibly displaced by the fighting between the government forces and LTTE in July 2006 over the issue of opening the Mavil Aru sluice gate (see Yusoff et al. 2014a;

ICG International Crisis Group). The same number of Tamils were displaced in Sampur and surrounding villages due to the above incident and following insurgencies.

The last stage of the civil war (2006–2009) resulted in extensive casualties, with the death of thousands of civilians and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians. An estimated number of over half a million innocent civilians, who were mostly from Tamil and Muslim communities in the north-eastern region, were displaced from conflict-stricken areas to safer ones during the last stretch of the civil war from 2006 to May 2009. In the northern province alone, over 300,000 people were displaced, with most of them housed in a state-run refugee camp called Manik Farm located between Vavuniya and Mannar districts (Saparamadu and Lall 2014).

With utmost effort, government authorities successfully carried out the relief, recovery, and resettlement of the internally displaced population in the last stage of the civil war. Through special projects, such as the “Northern Spring” and “Eastern Reawakening”, thousands of displaced people were resettled in their traditional areas and provided with basic infrastructure and livelihood development (see Saparamadu and Lall 2014; Kumar 2011). In the northern province, resettlement commenced in 2009 under the “Northern Spring” program, which was launched to resettle more than 280,000 new IDPs who were trickling in from the Vanni area during the final stages of the battle since 2008. The “Northern Spring” development program focused on three main aspects, namely, security, resettlement, and infrastructure development. Implementing the program entailed specific steps, such as de-mining the areas reserved for resettlement and reconstruction and building up basic infrastructure amenities for electricity, water supply, sanitation, agriculture, irrigation, livestock development, inland fisheries, health, solid waste disposal, education, athletics, and transportation. Rehabilitating former LTTE cadres, especially child soldiers, was a separate plan (Shamini 2012). However, the project poorly focused on accommodating the return and resettlement of forcefully evicted northern Muslims who have been living in temporary shelters and relocated villages for more than two decades. The end of the civil war created hope among the northern Muslims that permanent resettlement in their traditional villages would be facilitated. However, no post-war government has initiated any firm policy and project in this regard.

Forced evictions constitute violations of human rights and are generally discriminatory or lead to discrimination; therefore, states have a responsibility to ensure the protection of rights and lives and the return of the displaced (see United Nations 2014). Many international experiences suggest that any attempt at resettlement and development in a post-war or post-conflict context must reconcile the grievances of all parties affected by the conflict and war regardless of the nature of the impact and parties. The impact may be serious or otherwise, and the victims may be direct or indirect parties to the conflict, but all victimization and grievances must be recognized and reconciled (see Achieng et al. 2014; Asplet 2013; UNHCR United Nations High Commission for Refugees). Only then would post-war development or resettlement initiatives be sustainable. However, the case of the Muslims was not well accepted and recognized as forced displacement due to the intense civil war between the Sri Lankan government and LTTE. Apart from the Muslims’ vulnerable position in ethnic politics and civil war, the policies of internal displacement and resettlement of successive governments influenced on the persistent sidetracking of northern Muslims’ resettlement during and after the civil war. Government policies and projects on war-related displacement and resettlement were highly focused on the Tamils and had limited accommodation for the Muslims. The northern Muslims faced severe challenges in receiving relief according to international laws and norms, in obtaining refugee recognition and being accommodated in resettlement programs (see Haniffa 2015; Haniffa 2014). Although the northern Muslims experienced a quarter century of displaced life in refugee camps and relocated villages, no concrete plan was formulated by any pre- or post-war government to resettle them in their traditional villages, and only a small percentage was able to return and resettled. This scenario clearly indicated that the northern Muslims are the most vulnerable victims in the ethnic conflict, civil war, and post-war development in Sri Lanka. The following section analyzes the brief history of forceful eviction, nature of displaced life, and resettlement of the northern Muslims.

3.2. Forceful Eviction of Northern Muslims, Displaced Life, and Resettlement

A critical area in relation to Muslims in post-war Sri Lanka is the resettlement of the forcefully evicted Muslim community in the northern province. For this group of Muslims, the end of the civil war offered them hope to return to their lands and rebuild their community. However, no concrete plan was initiated by successive post-war governments in this regard, although they have initiated several settlement projects during the post-war period.

3.2.1. General Remarks on Northern Muslims and Their Displacement

Sri Lanka's northern province is predominantly a Tamil region, where Muslims formed a distinct and the largest minority community, scattered all over the province. According to the 1981 census, 50,831 Muslims lived in the five districts of the northern province and accounted for 5.3 percent of the total provincial population ([DCS Department of Census and Statistics](#)). Over half of the Muslims lived in Mannar district. Similarly, large concentrations of Muslims lived in the city of Jaffna and the town of Mullaitivu. Agriculture, fishing, and businesses were the main sources of livelihood for these Muslims ([Hasbullah 2004](#)). Although the Tamils formed the majority in the northern province, Muslims and Tamils coexisted without serious societal or communal conflict. Muslims had maintained a close relationship with Tamils, mutual trust in trade and business and in their cultural practices (Authors interview with Muslim IDPs in Puttalam, 20 July 2017). However, due to intense Tamil–Muslim tension in the eastern province and Muslim political mobilization that accompanied the establishment of a distinct Muslim political party in the middle of the 1980s, Tamil–Muslim relations in the north were affected. As a result, the leaders of the LTTE instigated the eviction of the northern Muslims from the entire province.

The mass forced eviction of the northern Muslims was unexpectedly carried out in the third week of October 1990. The LTTE announced over loudspeakers in the streets of the Muslim settlements in the northern province that the Muslims must leave their homes, villages, and towns without their valuables or face death. The ultimatum was that Muslims should leave the region in 48 h from 22 October 1990 ([Imtiyaz and Iqbal 2011](#)). Within a few days, Muslims were chased out of their homes where they had lived for centuries ([Jeyaraj 2015](#)). Muslim organizations and activists reported varying numbers of displaced northern Muslims in 1990, ranging from 80,000 to 100,000. However, no official estimates of Muslims expelled from the northern province exists. This number ranged roughly between 70,000 and 85,000, considering that the entire Muslim population in the northern province reached 50,831 in 1981 (Jaffna district, 12,958; Mannar district, 27,717; Vavuniya district, 6505; and Mullaitivu district, 3651) ([DCS Department of Census and Statistics](#)) and the annual population increase in the country.

The LTTE, which at the time controlled most of Jaffna peninsula, ensured that the fleeing Muslims left behind all household items, furniture, or in some cases, land deeds. Therefore, the Muslim community was forced to leave all their properties, which they had long earned through hard work and had served them well. Estimates of the economic loss of the northern Muslims as a result of their forced eviction vary. Although no human casualties were reported, around 5000 million Sri Lankan rupees in properties and livelihood were estimated to have been lost ([Shukla 2009](#); [ICG International Crisis Group](#)). However, according to Mohideen, a Muslim civil activist who conducted an extensive study, the losses in residential properties, commercial and industrial establishments, agricultural lands, religious institutions, gold and jewelry, and livestock amount to approximately US\$112 million ([MVN Minority Voice Newsroom](#)). In the Muslims' political history, the forceful eviction has been recorded and remembered as "ethnic cleansing". In addition, Muslim politicians considered the eviction of the Muslim community from the entire province as a political strategy of the LTTE and Tamils to establish a mono-ethnic Tamil state in the region.

To a certain extent, the above assumption is true. The expulsion of Muslims was followed by the emergence of a new national Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), in the middle of the 1980s. The SLMC emerged to protect the Muslim community, particularly those living in the north-eastern region, from the military impact of the civil war and to prevent Muslim

youths from resorting to violence and taking up arms to defend their community (Yusoff et al. 2017). However, the LTTE leaders suspected the formation of a new Muslim party as it would undermine the LTTE's goal of establishing a monoethnic Tamil state in the north-eastern region. This fear was further intensified when the SLMC and Muslims in the north-eastern region called for an autonomous political unit as a power-sharing mechanism for Muslims and seriously advocated such proposal (Yusoff et al. 2014b). The November 1988 election held for a merged north-eastern provincial council and the February 1989 parliamentary election proved that SLMC was emerging as a powerful force in Sri Lanka's ethnic and electoral politics. The forceful eviction of northern Muslims occurred after one year, i.e., in October 1990. Meanwhile, civil society institutions among the Tamils hardly expressed their opposition to the eviction or voiced sympathy toward the Muslims. All these proved that the forceful eviction was a planned move of the LTTE's polity for the sake of Tamils' self-determination.

However, from the Tamils' point of view, the northern Muslims were evicted to protect them from the impact of the civil war. Recently, when a Tamil National Alliance parliamentarian revealed that the forceful eviction of northern Muslims was "ethnic cleansing" and a mistake committed by the LTTE and that he did not approve of the Tamils' silence over it, another parliamentarian from the same alliance counterargued that the move was a careful act to save the Muslim community from the war (Hasbullah 2016; Hiru News 2015). The latter view was highly welcomed by Tamil politicians, critics, civil actors, and the public. Until the 2002 famous media conference, the LTTE barely issued an official apology for the forceful eviction of the northern Muslims and never publicly gave a clear explanation for their expulsion.

The expulsion of Muslims from the northern province proved to be ethno-politically motivated, and the LTTE justified it along this notion. A month after the expulsion, the LTTE's official organ *Liberation Tigers* claimed that the LTTE had lost "faith" in Muslims following the mass killing of Tamils by Muslims (quoted by Rajah 2017). The same organ also claimed that "by refusing to align with the Tamils and the LTTE . . . and by seeking to destroy the LTTE and the Tamil people, the Muslims had committed a historical blunder and treachery" (Ibid). Two years after the expulsion, Rutramkumaran, the LTTE's then-US-based legal adviser, justified the expulsion and claimed that the entire Muslim community in Sri Lanka was working to sabotage the Tamil secessionist movement (Rajah 2017, p. 84). Although the LTTE received tremendous criticism for this terrible act of ethnic cleansing, the LTTE leader Pirabakaran, who should have taken responsibility for this act, was conspicuously silent on the subject for a long time. A political activist of Mannar district who is living in a relocated village in Puttalam district said that the eviction carried out purely to make the north a monoethnic region and to establish a monoethnic Tamil state. According to him,

"LTTE was very keen in evicting the Muslims from the north without any property or money they had earned in their traditional villages arguing that they were earned from Tamils homeland. They took the keys of stores and shops owned by the Muslims few days in advance. They re-ensured the eviction of these Muslims with empty hands or limited essential food items even at many check points on the cross roads. In many areas, they did not give us sufficient time to leave. By evicting us in inhumane ways, how can they justify this eviction as for our safety and security? (Authors interview in Puttalam, 25 July 2017)."

Haniffa (2010) argued that, in general, Tamil nationalists view Muslims as fellow ethnics and traitors to the Tamil cause. However, for Muslims, Tamil nationalism meant a constant threat of violence, undermining their livelihood and steadily deteriorating relations with neighboring Tamil communities. Tamil nationalism had little real interest in incorporating Muslim representation or addressing Muslim concerns, particularly their return to their traditional villages. As far as the Muslims were concerned, the forceful eviction forever sealed the enmity between them and the Tamil people.

Given the relatively low political importance of Muslims in Sri Lanka in general, and Muslims of the northern province in particular, the plight of the northern Muslims has received very little attention at the time of the expulsion and in subsequent years. The government at that time did not show any interest in providing protection for these Muslims in their traditional villages or

safeguarding the property they left behind, even though over 85 percent of the evicted Muslims lived in government-controlled areas of the north. These Muslims were remembered by other Muslims and politicians only on the anniversaries of their displacement and during elections. At any other time, their issues, including their return to their ancestral homes, were marginalized topics for public debates and discussions.

3.2.2. Displaced Life with Host Communities

Most of the evicted northern Muslims found shelter and resettled in Puttalam, Kurunegala, and Anuradepura districts of the northwestern, north-central, and other provinces. Their number has now swelled to 250,000, according to many sources. The displacement of the northern Muslims in Puttalam was largely expected to be temporary, and the belief was that they would return to their homes shortly. Most of these Muslims arrived with little clothing and cash walking over long distances for as long as three days in certain cases, and even elders, youngsters, and small children came on foot. In their sorrowful journey, they did not receive any help except for a few cases in certain places (Authors interviews with IDPs in Puttalam, 24 July 2017). The locals (not only the Muslims, but also the Sinhalese) welcomed the Muslims from the north into their homes, gardens, and schools and provided them with clothes and food. In this process, the locals became hosts. For the first month or soon after, assistance from the host population was essential for the survival of the IDPs, and the role of the host community was recognized by the northern Muslims with almost unlimited gratitude (Brun 2009). However, after a few months, several issues arose between the IDPs and the host communities. When international non-government organizations (INGOs) took an active role in providing relief activities and other basic services, the hosts were excluded. The hosts were not consulted when the IDPs were moved to welfare centers, and they were not included in any decision-making regarding the handling of the IDPs (Brun 2009). These discrepancies led to difficulties and issues between the displaced Muslims and the host communities in due time.

For a quarter of a century after their flight and nine years after the end of the civil war in May 2009, most of these Muslims continued living in what were intended to be temporary relocation sites. In Puttalam, most displaced Muslims lived for many years by doing odd jobs. Decent jobs, especially for youth, were scarce. They are still viewed by the locals as second-class citizens. Dwindling water and land resources, as well as few jobs, have heightened the tension between Puttalam's native population and the Muslim arrivals (Irinnews.org 2013). The refugees lived in dismal conditions, and they faced numerous problems in their daily lives. Life in refugee camps has demoralized men, women, children, and the elderly and affected them physically, psychologically, socially, economically, and educationally (Asees 2015). Many of their traditional family structures have broken down, with women and men being forced to leave their families in search of livelihood or to go abroad in several cases, leaving the care and protection of children to elderly relatives or older siblings. According to Shukla (2009), 41 percent of the displaced population is made up of children who know no home other than the refugee camps and relocated settlements.

With the arrival of these Muslims, existing resource shortages were exacerbated in the districts, particularly in Puttalam. Conflicts continued to erupt between the displaced and host communities over limited resources and jobs in the area (Shukla 2009). These displaced Muslims were discriminated in their access to existing resources and opportunities to rebuild their lives. Job competition resulted in scarcity and loss of opportunities for the host population, and an environment of tension, hostility, and sometimes violence arose between the displaced Muslims and the host population (IDMC Internal Displacement and Monitoring Center). The conditions induced most of the displaced Muslims to be dependent on the relief provided by the government authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rather than engage in activities that foster self-reliance (Imtiyaz and Iqbal 2011). Although the Muslim community of Puttalam responded to the emergency in 1990, the need to continue to support the population for more than two decades seriously drained the resources of the community and affected the relationship between the host community and the displaced Muslims.

3.2.3. Ceasefire Agreement, Temporary Peace, and Resettlement of Northern Muslims

With the victory of the United National Front (UNF) coalition in the December 2001 general election, the UNF government signed a ceasefire agreement (CFA) with the LTTE in early 2002. Although the north-eastern Muslims were victims of ethnic conflict and civil war, Muslims were not given the opportunity to sign the CFA. However, in April 2002, the SLMC leader Rauff Hakeem and the LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran, after consultation, signed an agreement promising that the displaced Muslims would be allowed to return to their homes in the LTTE-controlled northern province, including with other promises (Yusoff et al. 2014a). Unfortunately, the LTTE and Tamil parties failed to make the necessary arrangements and assistance to bring these Muslims back to their traditional villages. Neither the LTTE nor any major Tamil party clearly discussed any meaningful resettlement of the forcefully evicted Muslims in their election manifestos or in major speeches and reports.

Although the northern Muslims have been clamoring for complete resettlement, this was challenged partly due to the LTTE's stronghold on the affairs of most areas in the northern region and their continued opposition, and partly due to the inefficiency of government authorities, especially during the so-called peace process (2002–2006) and in post-civil war context. These Muslims were compelled to live in refugee camps and relocated villages in abject conditions without being granted official refugee status. The few who returned between 2002 and 2006 were not provided with sufficient basic amenities by the government for their resettlement, particularly permanent housing and livelihood improvement. They laid claim to their properties that, in the interim, have been occupied by other displaced people. Further suffering occurred due to resource shortages and lack of support structures. This situation induced many who had returned to their traditional villages to return back to their displaced places. The repeated pleas of the Muslim community to the authorities for enhanced security and protection have fallen on deaf ears even with the presence of Muslim ministers and members of parliament on the government side.

The government and the NGOs did not establish any concrete program to facilitate the resettlement of displaced Muslims. Assistance for displaced Muslims was scant. One rare case was the US\$34.2 million World Bank-funded Puttalam Housing Project completed in December 2011. The project originally targeted 7885 houses, but only 4891 houses were handed over to IDPs and mostly targeted displaced northern Muslims, along with 519 non-IDP households in the adjacent community. This housing project intended to support the integration of IDPs in Puttalam by upgrading and improving the habitat, water, and sanitation facilities of IDPs and selected non-IDPs. The project aimed to provide housing for eligible IDPs in refugee camps and a limited number of non-IDPs in the host communities (see [The World Bank 2012](#)). However, in the FGDs, it was revealed that the selection of beneficiaries was mostly influenced by politicians, and many of them were loyal to influential politicians on the government side. Poor families and supporters of opposition political parties and general critics were mostly marginalized benefitting from this project (FGDs with displaced Muslims in Puttalam, 23 July 2017). This situation rendered the displaced Muslims vulnerable in resettling in displaced villages or returning to their traditional villages.

3.3. Post-War Development and the Question of Northern Muslims' Resettlement

In Sri Lanka, post-war plans for development remained problematic, although targets were achieved on time. Many programs were designed and implemented in the war-torn north-eastern region, which helped restore normalcy and rebuild basic infrastructure facilities in the region. However, most programs were designed with the objective of receiving continued support from the international community, which was expected to sustain the United People Freedom Alliance government in power. In addition, the resettlement programs mostly targeted internally displaced Tamils during the last phase of civil war. For the forcefully evicted northern Muslims, the post-war governments did not propose any comprehensive plan for permanent resettlement and livelihood improvement in the long run. The following sections identify the major characteristics and the challenges in post-war resettlement of these Muslims in their traditional villages.

3.3.1. No Proper Initiative or Plan in Resettling Northern Muslims

The post-war period has seen a wide range of large-scale development initiatives in the northern province, including infrastructure projects under the “Northern Spring” program. Although the government authorities initiated programs to resettle IDPs due to civil war, many initiatives focused on Tamils and not the Muslims who had severely suffered for over two and a half decades. As Asees (2015) pointed out, the end of the civil war in May 2009 brought hope for the resettlement of Muslim IDPs, but the Sri Lankan government and the international community prioritized the Tamil IDPs. Except for the World Bank-funded Puttalam Housing Project, assistance in resettling the displaced northern Muslims has been scant.

Only a few thousands displaced Muslim families were able to return and resettled in their traditional villages. Approximately 50,831 Muslims were living in five districts in the northern province, according to the 1981 census. At the time of eviction, their population was estimated to range from 75,000 to 100,000 in 1990. However, the 2012 census indicated that only 32,796 Muslims were living in the entire northern provinces (DCS Department of Census and Statistics). This number may have increased now, but no complete record is available to confirm their number. The current estimated population of the northern Muslims is roughly 250,000, but only less than 30 percent have returned to their traditional villages. As an educationist argued, government authorities, NGOs, civil forums, and researchers faced difficulties in estimating the exact number of resettled families in their traditional villages due to several reasons. Their permanent stay in resettlement villages was highly challenged by ad-hoc living styles, seasonal jobs and lack of livelihood availabilities, strong bonds with host communities, and permanent settlement of their second and third generations in displaced and host communities. All these factors made their returned life uncertain in their traditional villages, which, in turn, prompted many of them to live there on ad-hoc basis in different seasons (Authors interview in Puttalam, 28 August 2017).

The resettlement of evicted Muslims in Jaffna district became a serious challenge. In the Jaffna peninsula, over 2000—out of the nearly 8000 Muslim families originally from there—returned and registered for official resettlement schemes soon after the end of the war. However, by 2015, only approximately 600 of these families remained amidst immense social and economic difficulties (Kadirgamar 2015). Later, many returned to their traditional villages with little support from the central and provincial governments. According to the 2015 reports of the Jaffna District Secretariat, 8939 Muslims live in Jaffna district (District Secretariat, Jaffna 2016), which is mainly an urban community. However, Jaffna Muslims lack even the most basic infrastructure, such as water supply and drainage systems. Without a credible resettlement policy, government authorities provided little support for these families to return. However, Jaffna Muslims face different problems in their permanent resettlement. As an activist argued, although Muslims have had opportunities to return to Jaffna since the 2002 peace negotiation, they have sold most of their lands and properties before the end of civil war, expecting that the war will not be over soon. This situation resulted in land shortages for Muslim families when they registered for resettlement in the post-war period. Therefore, blaming Tamil politicians and officers for not offering sufficient lands and other kinds of support for Muslim resettlement is irrational given that Tamils too are facing serious land shortages for resettlement (Personal communication with a Tamil civil activist in Jaffna, 16 November 2017).

According to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), conditions should be prepared and properly set for people in a satisfactory manner before they return to their homeland (United Nations 2001). In the post-war context, the Sri Lankan government, as the only existing competent authority, has a responsibility to establish conditions and provide means to allow IDPs to return safely and voluntarily with dignity to their homes. They may also resettle voluntarily in other parts of the country. However, in the case of resettlement or return of northern Muslims, the government still fall short in providing basic facilities, such as rehabilitation of divisional secretary offices, hospitals, maternity homes, schools, cooperative outlets, agrarian service

centers, and post offices; restoration of clean and safe drinking water; and cleaning and construction of new wells.

3.3.2. Moral, Institutional, and Political Support from Tamil Community and Polity

As mentioned earlier, Muslims in the northern province had been living with Tamils peacefully, sharing common features, and having mutual understanding for centuries. This was also the case in the eastern province. Although Muslims claimed they are a separate ethnic group, they still share many common features with the Tamils. The two groups share similarities in terms of language, cultural norms, and traditions (see [McGilvray 1998](#); [Imtiyaz and S. R. Hoole 2011](#)). However, the intense ethnic conflict and civil war heightened the differences between them (see [Ali 2004](#)). Although Tamil politicians articulated that Muslims are ethnically Tamils who share many ethnic features, they did not oppose the LTTE's decision to evict the entire northern Muslims forcefully and did not sympathize with these Muslims for many years. Until the existence of the LTTE and their dominance over the societal and political spheres, no Tamil political party or representative has invited these Muslims back to their homes or initiated any project to resettle them. Even in the absence of the LTTE, neither the northern Tamil political leaders nor the northern provincial council they control have made meaningful initiatives to resettle these Muslims. When these Muslims attempted to clear their lands—now transformed into jungles—Tamil political leaders imposed various roadblocks.

The harrowing eviction of northern Muslims and its consequences are seldom discussed in Tamil politics in Jaffna and other parts of the northern province. Although a few Tamil opinion-makers provide circuitous justifications for the eviction in private, most claim that they are helpless in the face of the Tigers' decision. Even with the absence of the Tigers today, most Tamils remain indifferent, if not unwelcoming, to the return of the Muslim community. This situation reflects weakened Tamil–Muslim relations and a Tamil public sphere where little has been done to rebuild them ([Kadirgamar 2015](#)). [Jeyaraj \(2015\)](#) argued that in an environment where reconciliation is being talked about nationally and globally, the need for rapprochement exists between Tamils and Muslims in the north. Strong and sincere efforts to extend the hand of friendship should be made to the displaced northern Muslims and support their permanent resettlement.

Considerable debates transpired among Tamil politicians regarding the eviction of northern Muslims. Those who silently accepted what the LTTE did to the Muslims now argue that the eviction was for the sake of the Muslim community. However, their support for the resettlement of displaced Muslims to their traditional villages was more limited than what they justify the forceful eviction. It was obvious that Tamil politics was under the control of the LTTE. Therefore, Tamil politicians could not openly support the return or resettlement of Muslims. However, with the absence of the LTTE and with the establishment of a representative provincial government by the popular Tamil political force (Tamil National Alliance), Tamil politicians have more space and mechanism to voice or support the resettlement of northern Muslims through public campaigns and budgetary allocations. However, they poorly responded in this regard. The return of Muslims to Jaffna proved a bitter poor experience. Only a few registered Muslims were able to return, and they faced difficulties in regaining their lands and rebuilding their damaged houses, properties, and other basic facilities. They continued to appeal to be included in the Indian government-assisted housing schemes and other government assistance, but Muslims were hardly accommodated by the northern provincial council. Strong allegations of an unsympathetic local Tamil bureaucracy blocking these grants from reaching Muslim IDPs have been noticed ([Kadirgamar 2015](#)).

Criticisms and opposition arose when the Chief Minister of the northern province, CV. Wigneswaran, reported in 2016 and argued that Muslims were not discriminated in the matter of resettlement but highly accommodated in resettlement projects in Jaffna. According to him, out of the 4307 families who obtained lands between 2013 and 2016, 73.02 percent were Muslim, 25.66 percent were Tamil, and 1.32 percent were Sinhalese ([Balachandran 2016](#)). However, this report was opposed and criticized by Muslim civil actors. In a response to the Chief Minister's report, the Muslim Council

of Sri Lanka (MCSL) challenged Wigneswaran's report, arguing that the statistics provided in terms of number of families who were offered lands for resettlement was misleading. The president of the MCSL, MN. Ameen, pointed out that by 2013, only few Tamils were left to be resettled, as the government and the international community prioritized Tamil resettlement since the end of civil war in 2009. Hence, in the settlement program that took place after 2013, the percentage of Muslim families appeared to be high. Thousands of Muslim families must still be resettled in their former homes in the northern province ([Newsin.asia 2017](#)).

In 2017, a Muslim minister representing the northern province, who is also an IDP, attempted to resettle displaced Muslims in Mullaitivu district through a state-sponsored resettlement scheme. However, Tamils opposed this scheme, arguing that the move is intended to alter the ethno-demography of the area and to destroy hundreds of acres of forests planted and preserved by the LTTE. A social media post in which a Mullaitivu local government employee claimed that Mullaitivu will soon become Muslim-Tivu (island) sparked outrage among Tamil residents in the district ([Tamil Guardian 2017](#)).

The lack of Tamils' support for the return and permanent resettlement of northern Muslims shows the lack of trust and relationship between the two ethnic groups even though they share many common features and practices. Earlier Tamil leaders had been arguing that Muslims are not a separate ethnic group but are Tamils. During civil war and even in the post-war period, they argued that the LTTE evicted the northern Muslims to save them from the impact of civil war. Now they claim that Muslims and Tamils should unite to voice and achieve their rights collectively. However, the Tamils showed little interest in speaking out about Muslim community issues. From the intense civil war and due to the emergence of SLMC, the division between Tamils and Muslims has widened. In the post-war context, Muslims faced significant oppositions and challenges in promoting their ethnicity and in engaging in their religious and cultural practices. However, Tamil leaders barely expressed support for the Muslim community.

3.3.3. Opposition from Radical Nationalist Forces

The resettlement of northern Muslims was also challenged by radical nationalist forces within the Sinhalese-Buddhist community. A small number of Muslim families were resettled in their traditional villages in Mannar district through the patronage of Muslim politicians. Former resettlement minister Rishad Bathiudeen negotiated with certain Islamic organizations, who agreed to provide houses for marginalized Muslim IDPs. In 2012, Muslims in Marichukatti began their resettlement with the support of a Qatar foundation (Al-Jassim). Certain Buddhist hardliners and media groups began to claim that the resettlement was illegal and an incursion into the Wilpattu forest, although Muslims held deeds to these lands ([Asees 2015](#)).

Similarly, when political representatives of northern Muslims attempted to resettle these displaced Muslims in their traditional villages with the support of government authorities and foreign aid (mostly received from Islamic countries), Sinhalese nationalist forces opposed the move by arguing that those areas belong to the national wildlife area. Moreover, they claimed that Muslims destroy the national forest, nature, the environment, and illegally own government land. The opposition of Sinhalese nationalist forces, such as *Bodu Bala Sena* and *Ravana Balaya*, to the resettlement of Muslims in Musali divisional secretariat (DS) division, which was closer to Wilpattu National Park in Mannar district, was the major contested case in this regard. Although the land allocated for resettlement did not belong to the forest area, according to these forces, minister Rishad Bathiudeen was said to be responsible for the illegal clearing of the forest and building Muslim settlements there. This opposition ultimately brought the minister under investigation (see [ColomboPage 2015](#); [Perera 2015](#)). Despite evidence supporting the inhabitation of Muslims in many villages near Wilpattu, these forces continuously urged government authorities to declare the traditional Muslim-inhabited areas as an incursion into the Wilpattu Conservation Forest.

Given the pressure from extreme nationalist forces and certain environmentalist groups, government authorities issued new gazettes declaring thousands of acres of lands owned by Muslim

settlers close to Wilpattu in Musali DS division as forest reserves. Among them, Gazette No. 1779/15 of 10 October 2012, which claimed 6042 hectares of Marichukaddi/Karadikkuli forest reserve, and Gazette No. 1759/2 of 21 May 2012, which claimed 2108 hectares of Vilathikulam Forest Reserve, challenged the return and ownership of lands by evicted Muslims during resettlement. The issuance of a new gazette notification (No. 2011/34) by President Maithripala Srisena on 24 March 2017 added many Muslim-inhabited villages as part of Mavillu Conservation Forest and supported the opinions and claims of these nationalist forces in terms of the nature of the northern Muslims' resettlement (see [ColomboPage 2017](#); [Warunasuriya 2017](#)). The issuance of the new gazette also notified the position of the new government on the resettlement of northern Muslims. The President Serisena, who earlier claimed that not an inch of Wilpattu land has been encroached on by Muslims, was later convinced by Buddhist nationalist forces to sign a new gazette challenging the ownership of lands by these Muslims and their resettlement in their ancestral villages.

Many Muslim civil societies were up in arms over the new gazette notification (No. 2011/34) and stated that its issuance was a violation of the "right to return" of these patriotic citizens whose only crime was opposing the division of the country by the LTTE. They urged the president to revoke the gazette. According to Minister Rishad Bathiudeen, "There are no Muslim families living within Wilpattu reserves. The areas being talked about are out of the boundary of the reserve and legally taken" ([Nizam 2017](#)). In a press brief, Muslim parliamentarians and civil society leaders alleged that the latest Wilpattu controversy is based on a political agenda and that even during the three decades of conflict in Sri Lanka, Muslims continuously sided with the government. However, they are currently being targeted by the side they once supported ([Nizam 2017](#)).

According to many Muslims, the Wilpattu National Park or its buffer zone, which extends to 1.5 km², has no settlement (FGD with displaced Muslims in Puttalam, 29 August 2017). Few old villages existed, including Marichukkaddi, Karadikuli, Palakkuli, Mullikulam, and Kondachchi, for centuries. A settlement had been there even before 1916 ([Nizam 2017](#)). The LTTE chased these settlers away in 1990, and most of them were living in refugee camps. They returned to the area in 2013 after 23 years. However, government authorities, in response to the claims of extreme nationalists, failed to protect these traditional settlements of Muslims in these areas. Their lands became a forest during their protracted displacement. The opposition of the extreme nationalist forces ultimately contributed to the loss of thousands of acres of land these northern Muslims owned, further complicating the process of finding lands for their resettlement.

The resettlement of Muslims in villages near the Wilpattu area was facilitated by the then-UPFA government through houses that were built with the sponsorship of foreign (mostly Arab) donors. The protracted displacement of the families of this area has produced second and third generations of families with no land ownership. However, they must be accommodated in the resettlement schemes in this area, which necessitates more potential residential lands (Authors interview with two civil activists and residents of Marichukatti, in Puttalam, 29 August 2017). Therefore, considering this matter on humanitarian grounds, government authorities have the ultimate responsibility to resolve the issues of contested lands and settlement to facilitate the complete return and resettlement of these Muslims.

3.3.4. Issue of Ownership of Lands and Properties

Thousands of northern Muslims who were forcefully evicted and left without their belongings, including land-ownership documents, are now facing serious problems in resettling in their birthplaces and reclaiming ownership of their lands and properties. They are landless in certain villages because portions of land that belonged to Muslims were taken over by the army and navy for security reasons. In certain villages, displaced Tamils were already resettled in lands that used to belong to Muslims. After the Muslims were evicted, their lands, houses, and other buildings were destroyed, and those lands became overgrown with shrubs, trees and secondary forest, leaving no evidence of any previous human habitation ([Rajasingham 2013](#)). When these Muslims attempted to acquire the deeds to

their lands and to settle there, they faced difficulties from local bureaucrats, public, and politicians. Families who decided to return to Jaffna and Mannar districts faced similar problems with Tamil returnees over issues of land, the destruction of their homes, and livelihood and income generation. Similarly, northern Muslim returnees complained that government and humanitarian actors, who are largely staffed by Tamils, were not sensitive to their needs and were unwilling to assist them (Fonseka and Raheem 2011). Thus, northern Muslims experienced delayed resettlement for many months as authorities refused to provide clearance certificates and identified government lands. Despite their significant political clout with two/three MPs and one cabinet minister, northern Muslim returnees encountered difficulty in securing equity in terms of assistance.

The Rajapaksa regime also made further initiatives to make northern Muslims landless in their birthplaces. Such initiatives made amendments to the Forest Ordinance and declared a large extent of lands in the northern province as forest reserves through global positioning system mapping even without consulting the DSs of those areas. Many Muslims who lived in Musali South were not allowed to return to their lands, as their lands were not identified as private properties in this mapping process due to their displacement (Ahamed 2016).

3.3.5. No Collective Political Voice for Resettlement Due to Fragmentation of Muslims Politics

The fragmentation of Muslim politics has also negatively influenced the process of northern Muslim resettlement. When Muslims were forcefully evicted, the SLMC under its founder-leader, MHM. Ashraff, voiced their grievances and their settlement. As a leader of a Muslim political party and a minister in charge of rehabilitation and reconstruction (1994–2000), Ashraff helped to settle temporarily these Muslims in camps and relocated villages with basic amenities. Members in FGDs remembered the valuable contributions of Ashraff and the parliamentarian representing them during the initial stage of their displacement. Although Ashraff could not propose initiatives to resettle them in their traditional villages due to the intense war, he was the one who initially proposed to resettle these Muslims in relocated model villages in Puttalam and other districts temporarily. Many first-generation displaced Muslims still find that move a great relief to their eviction (FGDs 01 and 02 in Puttalam, 23 July 2017). However, with the sudden demise of Ashraff in September 2000, the party became fragmented (Yusoff et al. 2017). Although SLMC's new leader and representative of Vanni electoral district worked with the World Bank housing project for the Muslims, the dissolution of parliament and the regime change in 2004 meant that they could not participate in the implementation of the said housing project.

When a representative of the northern Muslim left SLMC in 2004 and worked against its interests, the new SLMC leaders progressively abandoned their interests on issues regarding the northern Muslim community, particularly that of their resettlement. After the demise of its founder-leader, the SLMC received popular support and political strength in the successive general elections, which made the SLMC able to decide the central government. However, the SLMC failed to influence any government in resettling northern Muslims permanently in their traditional villages and in proposing any relevant program. When an opposing politician, who broke away from the SLMC and formed his own Muslim party, the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) became a cabinet minister for resettlement, attempted to resettle these Muslims with the support of foreign aid mostly received from the Arab world, the SLMC leaders hardly supported his initiatives.

The resettlement initiatives undertaken by the ACMC leader were highly criticized and opposed by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists, but no Muslim party or leader supported the leadership of the ACMC. At the beginning of the eviction, no Muslim political parties existed except the SLMC. However, from 2000, many new Muslim parties and forces have emerged and have been influencing Muslim and national politics. For the resettlement of northern Muslims, most of these parties, except the ACMC, which is headed by an evicted northern Muslim, have done little except reporting about the anniversary of these Muslims' eviction to the media. In certain parts of the northern province, Muslim politicians exploited the situation of the returning population.

Displaced Muslims are concerned that their life and return to their traditional villages become more complicated partly because of fragmented Muslim politics. Many educationists and civil activists agreed that the opposition politics of the SLMC and the ACMC produced further divisions within their community, thereby affecting the success and sustainability of their resettlement. This may lead to the marginalization of families and villages in resettlement initiatives and to complicate resettlement in certain areas (Collected information from FGDs in Puttalam, July–August 2017). Obviously, the ACMC has continued to work against the interests of SLMC. With the demise of SLMC's prominent northern leader and parliamentarian, Noordeen Mashoor (1963–2010), the SLMC has progressively lost its focus on the north. These factors may have influenced the SLMC's lack of support for the resettlement initiatives of northern Muslims.

Kadirgamar (2015) rightly pointed out that on the matter of these Muslims' settlement, the politics of patronage led to handouts for some, but the marginalized continued to suffer as they faced what was a mockery in the name of resettlement. Muslim politicians who represented the people of the northern province overcompensated or provided aid to their family and party loyalists. The poor and the neutrals continued to face serious challenges in returning to their homeland and getting basic facilities in their resettlement villages. MVN (Minority Voice Newsroom) argued that the expulsion of these Muslims remained marginal within the discourse of ethnic conflict and the many peace processes due to a combination of factors, namely, the lack of community mobilization and insufficient attention, failure to obtain recognition at national and international levels through publicizing the issue by Muslim politicians. Moreover, the northern Muslims' interests became secondary to the interests of many Muslim political parties.

4. Discussion

As a second minority group, Muslims became the victim of ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka, although they had never been a competing or conflicting party. The expulsion of the Muslims from the northern province was one of the greatest injustices meted out to them. They have been experiencing tremendous hardships, disadvantages, and oppression in their displaced life over a quarter century, and therefore, their displacement should be ended. As citizens of Sri Lanka, they must be allowed to return and be resettled in their own traditional villages assisted by the government, politicians, and civil forces. In the history of Muslim and ethnic politics in Sri Lanka, the expulsion of northern Muslims has been annually remembered as a cruel and inhumane episode synonymous with "ethnic cleansing". Hasbullah (2004, p. 234) argued, the Muslims who lived for centuries in the northern province have the right to return and resettle in their traditional villages. Continuously neglecting to help them resettle is a denial of their right to live in their lands. Therefore, the resettling of these Muslims, including other Muslims and Tamils displaced by the civil war, not only will resolve their grievances but also would empower their lives, livelihood, and relations among different ethnic groups in post-war peacebuilding and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

However, resettling people who have been displaced for years is more complicated than resettling those who have been displaced for a short time. The northern Muslims have been experiencing a protracted displaced life. Most of them are wary of leaving their current residence because they lack the means to resettle. They have been displaced for a long time and have tried to build a life in their resettled areas that they may opt to settle there. Many of them have strongly established their livelihoods and families in the displacement villages, and their children are comfortable with the available educational and vocational facilities. This situation is especially true for the generation born and brought up in displacement. However, vulnerabilities exist within the northern Muslim community with different aspirations for their return and the complex nature of protracted displacement. Although certain northern Muslims may have established houses and businesses in displacement sites, others who do not own property and do not have sustainable livelihoods are considering returning to their traditional villages. Without access to permanent accommodation, public facilities, and livelihood opportunities, coming to a judgment on their view

of settlement is irrational and can increase challenges for their resettlement. These complex matters related to their resettlement require special attention from government authorities, ethnic majorities, and international actors.

The lack of proper assistance and basic amenities poses a serious challenge to the resettlement of northern Muslims and of the residents who have already settled in their traditional villages. In 2011, although many Muslims living in camps in Puttalam and other areas have registered to return to their traditional villages, they did not go or were afraid to go because of many reasons. According to the FGDs, many Muslims immediately registered to return as they feared that they may not be able to do so in the future. They registered, hoping that government authorities could make necessary arrangements and facilities, such as identifying and allocating lands for their resettlement, initiating housing projects and expanding livelihood opportunities. Many second and third generations of displaced families do not have lands, houses, and jobs in the north, and they were afraid that the lack of infrastructure would mean their family members would not have access to basic education, healthcare services and livelihood activities.

From 1990, the northern province was monoethnic for more than two decades, and many Tamils had forgotten that it once had a substantial Muslim presence. Amidst the many other problems that have emerged after the end of civil war, the political leadership in the north is adjusting slowly and sometimes reluctantly to the prospect of the Muslims' return. However, no consensus has been reached by the Tamil political leaders in the north about the eviction of Muslims and their resettlement. Muslim villages were decimated, and their homes were destroyed during their long displacement. Furthermore, families have expanded, and returning Muslims need land, infrastructure, and livelihood assistance (Haniffa 2014). Tamil politicians must accept all these facts and ensure that their community welcome the evicted Muslims as fellow residents of the north. Such actions could encourage the Muslims to consider the locals as their brothers, sisters, and neighbors. Therefore, all these issues must be seriously considered in the resettlement of these Muslims.

For the displaced northern Muslim community, scant information and arguably little discussion exist on the available choices of return or local integration. Conditions in return sites are poor, and limited assistance means that many northern Muslims may require time to rebuild their lives and gradually return. In addition to families who are landless or are occupying land without proper documentation, new families exist among the displaced (i.e., those families who were born and grew up in displacement and are not able to make any land claims). The extent of assistance for such families, including the provision of state land, is unclear (Fonseka and Raheem 2011, pp. 72–73).

Many studies and commissioned investigations found that the evicted northern Muslims are in a vulnerable position in terms of their displaced status and opportunity to return to their traditional villages with official sponsorship. As argued earlier, their forceful eviction and the delay of their permanent resettlement are violations of their right to own and live in their traditional lands. The Lesson Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), appointed by President Rajapaksa on 15 May 2010 to understand the cost of war and public grievances, positively reported the grievances of displaced northern Muslims and the importance of their resettlement in their traditional villages with state sponsorship. In its final report (2011), the LLRC acknowledged that displaced northern Muslims have been living in “dire conditions” for more than two decades and experiencing trouble integrating and noted that “the treatment given to the Muslim community of the northern province has led them to believe that they are at the bottom of the list of priorities of the government, INGOs, NGOs, and the donor community” (MFA Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Irinnews.org 2013). The same report concluded that Muslim IDPs remain one of the “key post-conflict challenges” with “significant impact” on reconciliation prospects. The LLRC agreed that durable solutions must be found to address these long-standing issues concerning the evicted northern Muslims, which would sow seeds of disharmony and dissension if they remain unaddressed (Irinnews.org 2013). However, except for establishing committees and commissions, no meaningful initiative has been undertaken by government authorities to permanently resettle the forcefully evicted northern Muslims who have been living in displaced

and relocated villages for about a quarter of a century. They may be one of the longest IDPs in the civil war context.

Therefore, developing a credible and immediate policy on the resettlement of northern Muslims in their traditional villages is highly needed. In Sri Lanka, clear laws and policies regarding the definition of “IDPs”, “return”, and “resettlement” according to international standards and norms are lacking. Surveys, census, and policy plans have failed to record these forcefully evicted northern Muslims as IDP families who want to be resettled in their traditional villages. Given that their displacement is complicated, as part of the post-war state reform process, government authorities must accommodate them in the categorization of IDPs and resettlement schemes by adopting new or revising existing laws and policies.

5. Conclusions

The end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 created high hopes among displaced northern Muslims that their lives as refugees would end. However, post-war development and resettlement initiatives poorly accommodated the concerns and grievances of these forcefully evicted Muslims and their permanent resettlement in their traditional villages. The Sri Lankan government and international actors mostly prioritized internally displaced Tamils and sidetracked the resettlement of forcefully evicted northern Muslims. The few initiatives for the resettlement of these Muslims undertaken by the minister from the same Muslim community, who oversaw resettlement, faced serious challenges and opposition from different fronts and sources, particularly from extreme nationalists representing Sinhalese-Buddhist and political forces among Tamils.

The Muslims had been living with the Tamils in the northern province for centuries. They may have been living in other districts in recent decades, but the north is their traditional homeland. Returning to their homeland is their right that must be accepted and fulfilled by government authorities and concerned parties in the post-war development and resettlement processes. Government authorities have promised in many international forums the permanent resettlement of forcefully evicted northern Muslims. Similarly, many commissions and international organizations have recommended that Muslim concerns and grievances must be accommodated in any kind of post-war development, including the resettlement of northern Muslims. However, no meaningful initiatives have been undertaken by the government to implement the recommendations for ensuring the permanent resettlement of the evicted Muslims. Unfortunately, the Muslim community and their politicians have done little for the permanent resettlement of these Muslims, except for annually remembering and occasionally expressing support for them. Therefore, government authorities, recognizing the factors identified in this study and abiding with the conditions and requests of the international community, should develop a comprehensive plan to resettle these displaced northern Muslims in their traditional villages as part of post-war development and reconciliation processes.

Without meaningful initiatives to permanently resettle these forcefully evicted northern Muslims, who are in displacement for about a quarter century, in their traditional villages, remembering their eviction is meaningless for forging a pluralistic future and rebuilding relations between ethnic groups and communities, which is highly lacking in post-war Sri Lanka. A new plan for post-war resettlement, ethnic reconciliation, and political solution that is recognized nationally and internationally must be formulated and implemented. It must accommodate diverse concerns and grievances, including socio-economic ones, on the permanent resettlement of the northern Muslims. This step can ensure the sustainability of development and reconciliation programs in post-civil war Sri Lanka. The permanent resettlement of northern Muslims in their traditional villages can resolve their war-related grievances and integrate them with other major ethnic groups, particularly the Tamils and Sinhalese living in the northern province. Therefore, discourses and debates on reconciliation, development, and political solution in post-war Sri Lanka must go beyond focusing “Tamils-Sinhalese problems”. In these processes, other minorities who have been victimized and suffered due to ethnic conflict and civil war but marginalized in peace-building and settlement

discourse must be considered and accommodated. For the permanent resettlement of the northern Muslims, policy reforms, plans, and the commitment of political and administrative elites are important prerequisites. Honesty, sensitivity, and understanding from all communities and stakeholders must be practiced in post-war development and reconciliation to deal with minority issues, including the permanent resettlement of northern Muslims.

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Abbreviations

The following Abbreviations are used in this manuscript.

ACMC	All Ceylon Makkal Congress
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
UNF	United National Front
UPFA	United People Freedom Alliance
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
IDPs	Internally Displaced Peoples
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
INGOS	International Non-Governmental Organizations
DS	Divisional Secretary
LLRC	Lesson Learnt and Reconciliation Commission
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
CFA	Cease-Fire Agreement
MCSL	Muslim Council of Sri Lanka

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