After the war comes Sri Lanka's refugee crisis

No wonder desperate Tamils are trying to reach Australia. **Eric Ellis** reports from Menik Farm refugee camp

Last week at her bowls club, in a bucolic town in Victoria's whitebread Western District, my mother mentioned to 'the girls' that I'd soon be in town for a school reunion.

Her bowling mates know that I'm a foreign correspondent, reporting from sometimes difficult places in that amorphous, overspiced, brown-skinned, not-quite-sure-about place called Asia. 'Oh, where's he coming from this time?' one of the girls, let's call her Joy, inquired. 'Sri Lanka,' my mother said. 'He's been in the refugee camps. Eric said there are thousands of Tamils in there after the war.'

Joy considered this disturbing revelation. 'Yeah, that's the trouble,' she grimaced. 'They just keep on breeding up there in Asia.' My mother said it came out as 'breeeeeeding', offered as might a disgusted farmer of a rabbit infestation. Ever the diplomat one has to be to socially survive post-Hanson Middle Australia, my mother tactfully moved matters to something safe and sporting.

As Kevin Rudd is quickly coming to realise, there hasn't been much breeding in northern Sri Lanka in recent times. There's been some industrial-scale slaughter, disease, malnutrition and probably torture. But breeding? No, Voter Joy, that really hasn't much happened, at least not at Menik Farm, which in May suddenly became a tent city of almost 300,000 people, the country's fourth most populous settlement, when after a 30-year civil war, the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were defeated by government forces, who then interned and interrogated almost an entire ethnicity.

Menik Farm is a massive open prison hastily arranged over a flat and sweltering monsoon-soaked 570 hectares 300 km north of the capital, Colombo. That's not how the government would describe it, however. To its spinners, Menik is virtually a Sri Lankan Club Med, a 'transitional facility' to house the 'internally-displaced' until Western aid agencies clear battlefields of mines and the 160,000 people that remain before returning to their villages and become normal Sri Lankans, whatever that means in this embittered country.

At Club Menik, there are banks, shops, sporting fields, WiFi, mobile phones, schools and vocational training, much of it self-administered. As camp commandant, Sri Lanka's formidable former police chief Chandra Fernando, insists, the facilities are better than those demanded by UN protocols. Menik housed near 300,000 at its chaotic peak but now it's about half that, with the rest cleared 'within six months, probably sooner', according to Fernando. Last week, 40,000 were released after the EU and US waved economic sanctions at Colombo and threatened to withdraw aid support.

Inmates can come and go unescorted largely as they please, says Fernando. But life's so good at Menik, Fernando says, many actually choose to stay here, guaranteed a free feed and shelter. Tamils screened and released get two weeks' rations and about A$250 to start rebuilding their homes. Fernando claims that 'Alex' and friends, those terrified Tamil refugees appearing Australia-bound on television screens in boats off Indonesia, and sometimes dying there, aren't refugees from Sinhalese persecution at Menik, 'they're Tamils from down south who don't get a proper job. Some might be criminals'.

Sri Lanka's horrified Tamil diaspora, still devastated by their sainted Tigers' sudden, somewhat pathetic capitulation and their dream of independence crushed, have a different view. To them, Menik is a concentration camp, a final solution of genocide, of disappearance and of many questions, a place where Colombo's ongoing 'screening' process to de-Tigerise Tamils actually means to de-Tamilise the island of Sri Lanka. With little evidence, they claim as many as 5,000 people have died there since May's end of fighting, by malice, malnutrition, maladministration and murder, and the rest only saved by media and diplomatic attention.

As the Tigers' defeated generation melt away, their heirs say what's happening at Menik will prompt Colombo to pass its massive refugee crisis on to the likes of Australia to solve, while radicalising a new generation of Tamil rebels in Australia and elsewhere. They say the war will go on, in Colombo lawsuits and in UN war crimes trials and maybe the battlefield again.

As it has always been in this nasty war, the truth is somewhere in the middle.

I was escorted to Kadirigamar camp, regarded by aid workers as the most comfortable of the seven camps. The Tamils say the government houses the more benign detainees at Kadirigamar. The camps are named after Tamil heroes — the ones acceptable to mostly Sinhalese Colombo, at least. Lakshman Kadirigamar was then President Chandrika Kumaratunga's ethnic Tamil foreign minister in her cabinet, until he was assassinated, supposedly by the Tigers, in 2005.

In trying to eradicate the 30 years of the Tigers' personality cult around its now dead leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran, Colombo's forced nationalism in naming camps after government-acceptable Tamil champions is understandable. But as with many things about Sri Lanka, from its wobbly infrastructure to its wobblier propaganda and politics, maintenance is the problem. Menik's overlords, most of whom can't speak Tamil, divide their realm into Zones 1 to 7. In the elective dictatorship Sri Lanka seems to be evolving into under the hugely popular President Mahinda Rajapakse and his three politician brothers Basil, Gotabaya and Chamal, it's all a little Orwellian.

I was invited to go wherever I wanted in Zone 3, talk to anyone, take photos, ask any question I liked. Which was fine, except it didn't much happen. I was rushed around Zone 3 embedded in a military convoy, next to Fernando and surrounded by bodyguards, my every move caught by photographers.

Behind the wire: internally displaced Sri Lankans at Menik Farm refugee camp in Cheddikulam

Menik's inmates seemed cheerful enough, inasmuch as one can be happy living bare-chested with three kids in a floorless UNHCR canvas tent during one of the world's wettest monsoons, with questionable sanitation. But no one grizzled, no one seemed emaciated, kids weren't obviously diseased or squealing in pain, bellies weren't distended by hunger and, yes, there were banks and blokes on mobiles and wives spending money in vegetable markets and young women learning how to use a loom to make a sari or a sarong, and earnest Westerners in Arafat-esque refugee chic keffiyeh scarves rushing around in white 4WDs. I've seen harsher refugee camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, from which sprang the Taleban, and better ones in East Timor and Cambodia. But I've never seen almost 200,000 people enclosed by razor wire and being told they've been liberated from tyranny by their captors.

After 45 minutes touring Zone 3 – 'you've seen it all,' said Fernando, keen to rush to a wedding in Colombo six hours' drive away — I came away feeling that what one can't see is more revealing than what one can. 'Absolute nonsense,' Fernando said. 'You told me you want to write the facts. You can either take a historian's view, based on facts, or a lawyer's view, manipulating information to suit your story.'

Sri Lanka is burdened by as fetid and primeval an ethnic divide as any that blighted the former Yugoslavia. I've witnessed highly-educated Tamils and Sinhalese nearly come to blows over which ethnicity got to the island from India first. The Tigers' name of Eelam for the Tamil lands is a provocation to the Sinhalese – the term suggesting the entire island, etymologically dating back millennia. Like Serbs in the former Yugoslavia and Jews in Israel, the Buddhist Sinhalese are a religious and ethnic majority who've always felt like a minority, casting themselves as an Aryan island in an archipelago of Dravidians.

But there are immediate jealousies. In the former Ceylon, regarded by London as a colonial afterthought during the Raj, the British favoured the Tamils as a merchant and administrative class because of their willing embrace of the English language and Western education at a time when Ceylon was developing a modern society. London ran Ceylon with a lightly-armed police force. It was a place for seaside summer holidays away from the heat of India. One reason why the island's voluptuous south coast was so devastated by the 2004 tsunami was that the coral cover was dynamited by British army officers to provide sandy beaches in front of villas.

Ceylon had a decade of post-independence harmony after 1948. Everyone was related to each other in an ethnic masala, as Michael Ondaatje described in his delightful 1982 memoir *Running In The Family*. But in 1955 Solomon Bandaranaike, still

Wildly popular: Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse

smarting at being overlooked as independence PM, examined the ethnic map where the Sinhalese comprised a 75 per cent majority, and campaigned on a 'Sinhala Only' ticket, playing on probably correct Sinhalese suspicions that the Tamils were rich and privileged. He won power in 1956, founding a noxious dynasty that his wife Srimavo and daughter Chandrika would inherit on his assassination at his Colombo home — now a splendid boutique hotel — in 1959 by a Buddhist monk incensed that he didn't go far enough.

Impoverished Sri Lanka could have been Malaysia, with its politics of ethnic coalition and booming economy. But instead it became a South Asian Rwanda, spawning a generation of militants in the disenfranchised north, the Tamil Tigers. Sri Lanka is the country where the Muslim community, a Tamil-speaking merchant class of 10 per cent of the population, are the moderates.

The civil war stunted nationalism and community on the island, and the economy too. Today, the 22 million people who crowd the island tend to identify themselves not as Sri Lankans but by ethnicity, religion and caste in a way that, say, Malaysians or Singaporeans with similar histories and racial-religious divides rarely do. To Westerners charmed by its beaches and tumbledown architecture, Sri Lanka is Ceylon with alluring colonial whiffs, which remain mostly because the economy has been so devastated. There hasn't been development because few will invested in a poor country at war, where the best and brightest have fled to places like Australia, where they've done well, and kept home fires burning and well-financed, true believers to the end of a deeply flawed cause.

If Wilson Tuckey believes there are 'Tamil terrorists' on Rudd's Tampa in Indonesia, then by his definition he hasn't gone far enough. They are already here, in paid-off homes in middle-class havens like Strathfield in Sydney and Melbourne's Glen Waverley, and have been for a generation, pursuing the opportunities denied them in Sri Lanka. They are also Australian citizens and, in many respects, exemplary immigrants, often self-made millionaires who could be your physician, your chief technology officer, your financial advisor, that nice family down at the club, though perhaps not the bowls club.

I started working the Tamil diaspora in 2003 to convince them to offer up Prabhakaran, arguing this was an opportunity to proclaim a genuine intent for peace as was claimed but which LTTE militancy frequently betrayed. Truth be told, I simply wanted a scoop. I was passed up the LTTE's Australian hierarchy, quizzed as to my true intention, simply to interview one of the world's three most elusive newsmakers, after Osama bin Laden and North Korea's Kim Jong Il. In a cafe at Sydney's MLC Centre, I was interrogated over latte by a six-figure systems analyst for a major bank, who is now a director of a public company. He described a factionalised movement, divided between pro-Prabhakaran hardliners who favoured war with Colombo, spurning the then government's peace talks, and moderate 'diplomats' who believed the federation deal promoted by Western peacebrokers was as good as it gets.

He handed me, Le Carré-like, to parties on both sides. I met a wealthy LTTE donor in the Sydney Westin, who favoured the diplomacy route. I shared an excellent risotto alla Milanese with a millionairess — and take-no-prisoner hardliner — at a trendy restaurant in Newtown, and was eventually passed on to a chap I believe was the LTTE boss in Australia, an elegant man who chatted over Perriers in a greasy spoon at Sydney's Wynyard station as his children sat politely before he took them to soccer.

These Tigers advised me to stand by my phone and tell them when I'd visiting Sri Lanka. I waited and waited. Be patient, they counselled. I waited some more. I came and went several times. The ceasefire started to crumble. The Tigers and their proxy Tamil National Alliance boycotted elections, allowing Rajapakse, a bluff but cunning nationalist lawyer from the Sinhalese heartland south who positioned himself as the champion of the semi-literate rural poor, to triumph over Ranil Wickremesinghe, a limp political aristocrat backed by the arrogant Colombo elite.

Now that's all over. And in Australia, LTTE supporters in Strathfield and Glen Waverley are suddenly rather circumspect about their secret lives now that Prabhakaran is dead and the movement near fatally wounded. Or maybe they realise they backed the wrong side, those now on boats for Australia. This is not over, Mr Rudd.