

## Peace brings new pressures on water in northern Sri Lanka

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Water storage towers were among the infrastructure destroyed in the north of Sri Lanka during three decades of fighting. [ALERTNET/Amantha Perera](#)

By [Amantha Perera](#)

**SELVANAGAR, Sri Lanka (AlertNet)** – When she came back to her house almost two-and-a-half years after fleeing it amid intense fighting, Rajina Mary looked desperately for one thing – the well in her garden.

It was early 2011, and the 38-year-old war widow had returned to her village with her four children to rebuild a life devastated by Sri Lanka's prolonged conflict, which ended in 2009.

"When I saw the well covered with weeds, but relatively intact, I was so relieved," she says.

The well, in this parched village in the country's Northern Province, meant that when one of the region's frequent droughts sets in, her family would not have to walk miles to look for safe water. That is the fate of thousands of others who returned to find their wells caved in.

"When we rebuilt our house, we did not have any water issues, we just used the well," Mary said.

But as people return to the war-ravaged region, experts are warning that pressures on its water supply are growing and that using water sparingly will be crucial, particularly as climate change brings more weather extremes.



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Over 460,000 people have returned to the Northern Province since late 2009. The massive influx of people, coupled with increases in farming, construction and other industries, has caused an enormous increase in water usage, experts say.

The biggest overuse is happening in small agriculture plots that use mechanized pumps. Thousands of such pumps have been distributed among returning civilians and are in daily use. Ravi Vinanithambi, an environment officer with the government's Emergency Northern Recovery Project, estimates that the pumps extract three times the necessary water requirement.

"There are no measurements, no control knobs on the pump, it just sends out water like a flood all the time," he said. A possible solution is to introduce more water-efficient sprinkler systems, but Vinanithambi said the cost of those was too high for the often poor families returning to the region.

Without better water management, the region faces dire water scarcity, experts say.

That vulnerability is evident in an online water mapping tool maintained by the World Resources Institute (WRI), which marks Sri Lanka's Northern Province as a high-risk area for water security.

"Dramatic variation in water availability (like) seasonal shifts, as well as events such as floods and droughts, make good water management difficult," said Robert Kimball, a spokesperson for [WRI's Aqueduct Project](#).

In the last 15 months, the Northern Province has experienced several bouts of weather extremes. A 10-month drought ended only in November 2012, and since then the province has been hit by three major floods.

"The issue in the region is not water scarcity, at least not right now," said Herath Manthirithilake, head of the Sri Lanka Initiative at [the International Water Management Institute](#). "It is a case of water management—or lack of it."

According to Manthirithilake, over the past few years the Northern Province has received three-quarters of its historic annual rainfall of about 900mm. But a more serious problem is the infrastructure destroyed by three decades of conflict, and the lack of water management.

For the moment, he said, rehabilitation of water resources is taking place only in an ad hoc manner.

"We get one tank renovated, or one water supply scheme put in place, whereas what we need is the redevelopment of the entire water infrastructure in the province and its proper upkeep," he said.

Those who live in the province know very well what it is like to deal with water that is in over-abundance for a few months when it rains and then vanishes as the long dry spell sets in, usually after April.

"When it rains there is water everywhere, even inside our houses; when there is no rain, there is no water, even in the wells," said Chitra Gurukulraja, a resident of Tharmapuram area.

According to recent research, even that lopsided supply may be in danger now. Thushyanthy Mikunthan, an agricultural expert at the Department of Agriculture at Jaffna University, has found that even during the war, water consumption in the Jaffna Peninsula, which makes up the northern tip of the province, was dangerously high.

In 2008, Jaffna was using 20 percent more than the annual water recharge by rain, [Mikunthan's research found](#). Ideally the usage should be below 50 percent of the recharge rate, he said.

"I am sure that usage rates in the entire province are much higher now that the war is over," Mikunthan added.

*Amantha Perera is a freelance writer based in Sri Lanka.*

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