

Sri Lankan military hid bodies of its Tamil victims in mass graves

Our correspondent
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Sri Lanka's People's Alliance government has been rocked by allegations that the military massacred 400 Tamil-speakers in 1996, then hid their bodies in mass graves.

The allegations were made during a high court trial by a Sri Lankan army officer charged with atrocities against Tamils. Corporal Somarathna Rajapakse told the court he could identify mass graves near the Chemmani army post, located in the suburbs of Jaffna, where the bodies of Tamils massacred by military personnel are buried.

The five other soldiers on trial with Rajapakse have said that during the military's campaign to assert government control over the Jaffna peninsula, which for several years was effectively in the hands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, it was routine to execute Tamils suspected of political disloyalty and secretly bury them. Soldiers who resisted orders to do so were punished by senior officers, they assert.

Rajapakse and his codefendants have been convicted and sentenced to death for their role in abducting, raping and murdering a schoolgirl, Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, then murdering her mother, younger brother and a neighbor when they went to the Chemmani army post in search of her. Outrage among the people of Jaffna over the disappearances ultimately compelled the government and police to uncover their graves and charge Rajapakse and his cohorts.

The People's Alliance regime is desperately trying to suppress the army officer's allegations, for they undermine its attempts to cultivate internationally an image as a guardian of human rights in contrast to the 'terrorist' LTTE. The acting Minister of Justice, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, urged that the allegations be 'carefully analyzed.' 'The soldiers could have just said this to implicate some senior officials through anger.'

The Human Rights Commission, to which the government has referred the case, has said it will visit the prison where Rajapakse is jailed, question him, and 'if there is anything in his statement for further investigations, we will consult the Attorney-General.' In the meantime, Rajapakse is expected to come under severe pressure from state authorities to retract his statement.

In April, Bill Richardson, US President Bill Clinton's special envoy, came to Sri Lanka, and, while noting there were allegations of human rights abuses under the PA regime, he declared its human rights record 'commendable.'

The truth is that under the PA regime the racist war conducted by the Sinhala bourgeoisie against Sri Lanka's Tamil minority has reached unprecedented ferocity. Begun in 1983, this war is the outcome of the Sinhala bourgeoisie's decades-long attempt to split the working class and channel mounting social tensions and frustration due to chronic poverty and mass unemployment against the island's Tamil minority. While the war has wrought destruction on the Tamils, it has also been used by the bourgeoisie to suppress democratic rights and workers' struggles in the majority Sinhalese-speaking south.

In 1994 the PA gained office by promising to end the war. But less than a year later it launched the largest military campaign of the war, seeking to unseat the LTTE from the Jaffna peninsula. To recapture this densely populated region, the military used aerial bombing, cannon, tanks and other heavy armaments. While most of the LTTE cadres retreated to the Vanni jungle, this offensive caused countless civilian casualties.

Having retaken Jaffna in October 1995, the government was able to get large numbers of Tamils

who had fled the city to return, partly through compulsion and partly by making promises of better living facilities and democratic rights. These promises appealed to the growing numbers of Tamils who chafed under the dictatorial regime the LTTE established in areas under its control and who had begun to question the LTTE's reactionary perspective of establishing a separate capitalist Tamil statelet in the north and eastern sections of the island.

Those Tamils who returned to Jaffna, however, soon found themselves living in a virtual armed camp. The military surrounded Jaffna city and its suburbs with checkpoints and mines. Moreover, the promises of food and housing were quickly broken. As opposition to these conditions grew, the military systematically mounted cordon and search operations under the pretext of looking for LTTE cadres.

There is no question that the Sri Lankan army is implicated in killings and mass disappearances. Various Tamil bourgeois parties that are aligned with the PA regime themselves charge that 700 Tamils were abducted and killed. Amnesty International has received documented complaints of 600 disappearances in Jaffna in 1996. That such large numbers were involved makes it clear these were killings were no carried out by rogue elements, but by soldiers acting with the sanction of the military top brass.

Moreover, the Sri Lankan military has been implicated in mass disappearances before. Between 1987 and 1990 some 60,000 rural youth were killed in a counter-insurgency campaign purportedly directed at suppressing the JVP, a petty-bourgeois, communalist organization that combines Sinhala chauvinism with populist demagoguery. There are mass graves filled with the disappeared in virtually every district in the south. One such grave was found at Embilipitya in the final days of the United National Party government. The current prime minister, PA leader Chandrika Kumaratunga, made a major issue of the Embilipitya mass grave because it fitted in with her efforts to exploit popular hatred of the UNP regime. Today her government is trying to find scapegoats on whom to hang its own crimes, but these efforts are increasingly coming unstuck.

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