Sri Lanka: Tamils protest against delay in excavating mass graves in Jaffna

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24 October 1998

Hundreds of Tamil people in Jaffna marched two miles to the administrative center of the district on October 16 to hand over a letter to the government agent, addressed to the president of Sri Lanka, demanding without further delay an inquiry into mass graves in Jaffna. This was the third such protest by Jaffna residents during last few days to make the same demand.

In the letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the organizers of the demonstrations alleged that there is a move to suppress the traces of mass graves. They complain that the people have seen smoke over the area where the alleged mass graves are situated, and that they fear that the army has started to burn the corpses.

This demonstration was organized by the Mothers Front, MERJ, the Hindu Youth Front, the Jaffna University Student Federation, the Jaffna University Teachers Association, the Bakery Workers Union, the Ceylon Mercantile Union branch and the Catholic District Forum for Justice and Peace.

In an earlier protest on September 27, 350 Tamils picketed in front of the Jaffna branch of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka for four hours, demanding an immediate investigation of the mass graves. Some human rights organizations have threatened to organize a fast until death if the government fails to heed their demand for immediate action.

The charge that there are mass graves in Jaffna was first made July 5 by a former soldier in the Sri Lankan army during a court case. The soldier, Somaratne Rajapakse, and five others in the army and the police were charged with raping a Tamil schoolgirl and murdering her and her mother, brother and a relative. After the court convicted all the accused, the soldier said he knew about mass graves at a place called Chemmani, near Jaffna town, where about 400 bodies of Tamils killed by the army were buried. All the other accused soldiers agreed, and said that if they had not obeyed orders to bury the bodies their superior officers might have punished them.

After the Sri Lankan military captured the Jaffna peninsula in 1996 in the course of the racist war by the People's Alliance government it was reported that about 700 youth and some elderly people had disappeared. Only 300 of them could be traced--as either having been killed or imprisoned by the army--in a painstaking search by the Mothers of the Disappeared and other organizations.

When the Tamil organizations met with President Chandrika Kumaratunga last December 29 she promised to appoint a commission to inquire into the disappearances. Nearly four months have passed since the allegations were made public about mass graves, and she has yet to appoint such a commission. When the allegations received international publicity and Tamil organizations demanded an investigation, the government reluctantly declared it would take action, but nothing has happened to date.

It is clear that the government, the military and the so-called Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka are making a joint effort to cover up this racist crime.

The United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) itself has revealed that the government has not given it permission to carry out an investigation. When the Tamil organizations demanded technical assistance from the UNHRC to excavate graves they demanded the government give its permission. But the government has not given the green light, although the UNHRC is ready to help, according to the UN agency's commissioner, Mary Robinson.

One commissioner of the Human Rights Commission

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of Sri Lanka (HRC) was schedule to travel to Jaffna October 4 to gather 'more information' about the disappeared persons. But he later said that he could not visit Jaffna 'due to transport problems.' These are nothing but stalling tactics. One member of this commission earlier charged that 'senior military officers are preventing further investigations,' and further said that there are obstacles because of 'on-going war operations in Vanni.'

On August 20 the soldier who first made the allegations about mass graves was severely beaten by prison officials where he is remanded and had to be hospitalized. According to press reports, the soldier was assaulted after he refused to make a false confession that his allegations were baseless. This attempt was made even after the HRC revealed that the soldier had reaffirmed the authenticity of his charges.

The PA government is neither willing nor able to investigate this racist crime against the oppressed Tamil people. Most of the generals who are now directing the war operations and controlling the Jaffna peninsula are the ones who massacred thousands of rural youths in the 1989-90 period in the South of Sri Lanka. Commissions appointed by the PA government to investigate these massacres have revealed the names of some of those generals. The government not only suppressed these reports but also stopped investigating the mass graves in the South.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are now making wider attacks in the Jaffna peninsula. After murdering two Jaffna city mayors within a few months, and two army heads in Jaffna, it has launched a campaign to disrupt the civil administration. In response, the PA government has ordered the military to carry out operations to 'flush out' the guerrilla forces. In one such operation on September 28 in Chankanaion, 5,000 villagers were rounded up and more than 100 detained for further investigations. That means that some of them may either be 'disappeared' or imprisoned as well.

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