Eyewitness account from Sri Lanka: Tamil mass graves excavated in Chemmani

Our correspondent
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The World Socialist Web Site *won the right to send its own correspondent to the scene of the excavation of mass graves of victims of Sri Lankan military butchery under the Peoples Alliance regime of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Priyadarshana Maddawatta of the* WSWS *was one among 40 journalists taken to Jaffna on Wednesday, June 16 by an air force plane. The trip was organised by the Sri Lankan Department of Information. This is an eyewitness account by Maddawatta.*

The day before we went to Jaffna, June 15, Somaratna Rajapaksa, who served in the North of Sri Lanka as a corporal in the army during 1995-96, when over 600 disappearances of Tamils took place, was flown to Jaffna under tight security. Rajapaksa claimed he could show the locations where the bodies of the disappeared were buried in mass graves

Rajapaksa, 27 years old, disclosed the existence of mass graves in Chemmani from the dock of the Colombo High Court. He made the revelation after he was convicted and sentenced to death, along with four other members of the Sri Lankan army, for the rape and murder of a Tamil schoolgirl, Krishanthi Kumaraswamy. It was a case of multiple murder. When her mother learned that Krishanthi had been arrested at the army checkpoint on her way home from school, she rushed to the nearby army camp in search of her daughter. Krishanthi's mother, brother and a neighbour were murdered by the army the same evening.

After the conviction, Rajapaksa said from the dock: “We did not kill anyone. We only buried bodies. We can show you where 300 to 400 bodies have been buried.” The area he described was Chemmani where he had served.

Rajapaksa's statement in the High Court was made nearly a year ago in July 1998. But the People's Alliance (PA) regime, offering different reasons at different times, postponed an inquiry into the matter. Three magistrates appointed to conduct the inquiry refused to undertake responsibility, one after the other. This was due to “external pressure,” as they called it. This time a magistrate had to be flown from Mannar, about 150 miles south of Jaffna, which is now under virtual military rule, to supervise the excavations.

In the week before his departure to Jaffna to point out the mass graves, Rajapaksa's family received continuous death threats, according to a complaint made by his wife to the police in the area. Obviously the military hierarchy, defended by the PA regime, did not want Rajapaksa to fulfil the commitment he made a year ago.

I saw Rajapaksa for the first time at the magistrate's court of Jaffna. His spat out furious denunciations of the army hierarchy, naming the personnel without restraint and accusing them in detail of the crimes they committed.

He spent about an hour giving evidence in front of the magistrate, prior to his trip to show the mass graves. Although some signs of strain were visible on him, he confidently said: “I can show you how people were arrested in Ariyalai, tortured and buried.”

Rajapaksa began his evidence by attesting: “I was at the Ariyalai army camp looking after civil administration. My job was to register family names and addresses and the names of the youths brought to the camp as suspected terrorists. We prepared two lists for this purpose.

“Once I was given a list of names, whom Captain Lalith Hewa and Lieutenant Wijesiriwardena said were Tiger suspects. I was ordered to show the places where these people lived. I showed them the places, as I know the area very well. Thereafter a group of soldiers conducted cordon and search operations in those areas and arrested some youths.

“Major Weerakkody and Major Gunasekara brought those people before two informants who were wearing masks, and the informants were asked to point out who the Tiger members were. The ones they identified were separated from the others.

“Then these people, about 50 of them, were brought to a camp. Some were kept in a school building. The orders were given by Captain Lalith Hewa, Lieutenant. Wijesiriwardena and Lieutenant Thudugala.

“One day they arrested the civil servant Selvaratnam, who worked at the educational department, and brought him to the camp. The next day his wife came and asked me if I had seen Selvaratnam. Although I did not know where Selvaratnam was held at the time, when I later went to the building which was used to torture people, Selvaratnam was among 25 others who were tortured there. Selvaratnam's legs were tied. He pleaded with me, saying he didn't have any Tiger connections. I asked Captain Hewa to release him. He agreed. But that same night he was killed. The next morning I saw 10 dead bodies there.

“The next day another man, one Udayakumar, was arrested and brought to the camp. Later his family came and pleaded with me for his release. I went to Captain Jayawardena and asked him to release Udayakumar. That afternoon he was transferred to another camp. When I went there, the officers in charge of that camp got a radio message to release Udayakumar. By that time he was hanging from his feet inside the camp and his body was cut with razor blades. They could not release him in that condition. He was killed later by a bullet. I know the weapons they used to torture people, and I think even now I can show them to you in that building.

“One day I was asked to bring a mammoty [type of spade] by Captain Lalith Hewa. When I took it to him he was with a woman who had no clothes on. This woman and her husband were brought to the camp earlier that day. Lalith Hewa had raped the woman and later attacked her and her husband with the mammoty I brought to him. Both of them died. Lalith Hewa tried to bury them there himself but he couldn't do it. Then the bodies were brought to Chemmani. I can show you where the bodies were buried.

“I can show you 10 places in Chemmani where bodies are buried. The other four convicted with me can show another six places. Although I was accused of murdering Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, I did not do it. I was asked to bury her body. But at that time I didn't know that it was Krishanthi's body that I buried.

“I know of two workers who worked as mechanics in a garage who were taken to the main camp and killed. I can show you the place where

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they were buried.

"I offered to reveal these things because I am falsely convicted of the murder of Krishanthi Kumuraswamy. I did not kill her. My family and I have received several letters threatening that all of us will be destroyed if I did not withdraw the statement I made at the High Court trial. Those in the army, who committed these crimes, try to escape by accusing me of guilt. I make these statements not to betray my country or to discredit the army. I do this because of the injustice done to me. If the justice is not done to me by the judicial system of this country, I am prepared even to go before an international court to get the justice done," Rajapaksa concluded.

By the time the recording of Rajapaksa's evidence at the magistrate court was over it was late afternoon.

When I came out of the magistrate's court, I saw more than a hundred people crying and weeping, about 150 yards away from the building, at the entrance of the pathway leading towards the courthouse. Armed soldiers were preventing them from reaching the court. I ran towards them to speak to them despite warnings not to do it.

The Chairman of the Organisation of the Parents of the Disappeared, Paramanadan Selvarajah, explained to me in English what the mothers were crying about.

"These mothers cannot bear the sorrow for the loss of their beloved sons and daughters. We all know that our loved ones are no more. We know that they won't come back to us.

"We know that our children were not LTTE members. They were victims of this cruel war. They were taken away from us by the army before our own eyes. If the army did not bury them somewhere, where on earth are they now? We want to know what happened to them and tell the world about their fate."

By this time the soldiers rushed to me and again told me to get back to the bus, as it was being delayed waiting for me. The other journalists joined the chorus of soldiers. Those journalist colleagues were not interested in listening to these weeping people. They were interested only in capturing their sorrowful faces in their camera lenses.

Then along with Rajapaksa, handcuffed to a prison officer, the journalists were taken in buses to Chemmani. The convoy stopped at the entrance to the salterate in Chemmani, which belongs to the government salt corporation, and Rajapaksa pointed out several places where he said bodies lay buried. It was clear that he was very well familiar with the site.

But that day there was not much time to continue extensive diggings. The diggings were postponed till the next day.

A larger crowd was at the Chemmani site waiting for the excavators to arrive.

I was able to speak to some of them while the excavation was going on. I had to use the English to converse with these Tamil people. But those among them who understood English helped me record interviews in Tamil so that I could get them translated into Sinhala and English after getting back to Colombo.

The father of one disappeared youth told me: "My son is Prabhakaran. When he was arrested, he was 23 years old. My son worked in a textile shop in Jaffna. When he was returning home from his work on his motor cycle, he had been arrested at the Chemmani army checkpoint. One of our family friends who had seen this informed me about the arrest on the same day. Without delay, on my bicycle, I rushed to the Ariyalai army camp. I saw the motor cycle of my son parked there. I inquired of the soldiers about my son. They said they never saw him. I pointed out to the motor cycle. They did not respond to that but insisted they did not have him in the camp. I also saw Rajapaksa inside the camp at that time." (At this stage he broke down weeping.)

Then I spoke to the Rector of St. Patrick College, Jaffna, Rev. N. Bernard, who is also the chairman of the Society for Justice and Peace in the peninsula. He said: "It is quite clear that violation of law has taken place here. The army has not acted responsibly, after they took over Jaffna from the LTTE. They have killed many innocent people, accusing them of LTTE connections. They could have allowed the law to take its course."

I pointed out to Rev. Bernard what the Major General in charge of Jaffna administration had said earlier in the day at the press conference held at Palaly airport. "He said that the people of Jaffna now have returned to normal life under the protection of the military. Is this true?" I asked.

Rev. Bernard replied: "Before 1996, Jaffna was under LTTE control. What the Major calls the normal life for people in Jaffna may be the life under the horrors of war. Even today people live in great fear. Without an army permit, people cannot move about. They are in fear because they know that they could be arrested by the army at any time, accused of being an LTTE member or a supporter."

Then I spoke to the secretary of the Association for Peace and Friendship, Subramaniam Paramanadan. I inquired about the living conditions of the people of Jaffna. His reply was: "About 800,000 people lived in Jaffna before 1997. Now the population is less than 500,000. Social conditions here have deteriorated enormously. About two years ago, Dr. Selvarajah of Jaffna University published a research report on children of this region. In it he pointed out that one of every five children born in Jaffna dies before the age of five. According to a Red Cross report, over 58 percent of Jaffna's children suffer from malnutrition. Children born are underweight. These are the harsh realities of this war.

"We supervise the rehabilitation programs conducted by the government. But we see this work is done by the regime having one foot firmly placed on the military and the war."

I also asked an ordinary citizen about how people carry on with their daily lives. He said: "We receive a small ration from the government. Even for a family of five, this is not enough to have two meals a day for more than four days in a week. Most people starve. The prices of essential goods are at unreachable levels for most poor people. The prices go up daily. At least Rs. 7500 is needed as minimum monthly expenses of a family. But most workers cannot earn even half of that amount.

"Because of the army permit system, people cannot move into other areas to get work. We are asked at the army checkpoints where we are going, whom we are going to meet, and so on. This prohibits us going in search of work," he said.

The next day, Thursday, June 17, after three hours digging started, forensic experts discovered earth that was different in colour and moisture from that of the surface bed of dry sand about three feet deep. Digging deeper, an hour later the excavators came upon the first sign of a human body, a knee covered with shreds of a trouser.

And by Thursday afternoon there were clear answers. Two bodies had been uncovered at a depth of four feet. The two bodies were lying one on top of the other, with a wooden railway sleeper sandwiched between them. One skeleton had a rag that had been used as a blindfold, with the knot at the back of the head still intact. The hands of the other skeleton were tied.

On Friday, June 18 morning, about 300 weeping relations gathered at the Jaffna police station to identify the bodies. It did not take long to identify those who had been murdered and buried.

The skeletons were of those two men who worked as mechanics at Suppiah Ravi's garage. One was 29-year-old Rasiah Sathiskumar, the other 23 year-old Mahendran Babu. They had been arrested by the Sri Lankan military at Ariyalai on August 19, 1996.

The two skeletons were identified by the garage owner Ravi and also by Shanthini, Sathiskumar's wife. This was clear corroborative evidence of what Rajapaksa had said at the magistrate's court. The excavations were abruptly suspended after the second day of digging until July 15. The nervousness of the PA regime about the revelations is quite evident. The policy of "war for peace" ties the regime more and more to the bootlaces of the military.

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