

Next phase of exhumation of mass graves in northern Sri Lanka to begin

Priyadarshana Meddawaththa
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The second phase in the exhumation of mass graves at Chemmani, in the suburbs of Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, will begin September 6 and continue until September 30. It is believed that about 300 missing Tamil victims of Sri Lankan government forces, especially youth, have been buried at Chemmani. The first phase of the exhumation was carried out on June 15.

The existence of mass graves at Chemmani came to light when five convicted soldiers gave a statement to a high court in June of last year. These ex-soldiers, convicted of raping a Tamil schoolgirl and killing her along with her mother, younger brother and a neighbor, told the court that the government forces in Jaffna killed hundreds of Tamils and buried them at Chemmani.

These five convicted soldiers were flown to Jaffna on August 28, and in the presence of observers from 30 countries and under the direction of the Jaffna magistrate were to give evidence and point out locations of mass graves from August 30 to September 1.

Forensic expert Professor Chandrasiri Niriella, head of a team of doctors and other experts who are assigned to carry out forensic examinations, told the media: "This is a large-scale exercise and it is very difficult for logistical reasons to carry out the exhumations in Jaffna." He further said that the necessary infrastructure was not available at the University of Jaffna to carry out examinations.

In the first exhumation on June 15, two skeletons were found and forensic examinations were carried out by Professor Niriella, observed by a team comprised of representatives from Amnesty International, the Asia Foundation and Physicians for Human Rights.

The report by Professor Niriella and his team was

presented to the magistrate of Jaffna, Illancheliyan, by a state counsel. It concluded that one skull, identified as that of Rasiah Satish Kumar, 23, had internal fractures produced by a heavy blunt weapon, causing fatal brain injury. The other skull, identified as that of Mahendran Babu, 29, showed evidence that the left cheek had been struck with a club, but this was not sufficient to determine the cause of death. There was definite evidence that the bodies were buried after the killings and that the victims had been tortured. Professor Niriella recommended that the skeletons be sent abroad for mitochondrial DNA analysis to determine the specific cause of death.

The investigation into the mass graves was only undertaken by the Sri Lankan government after intense protests by Tamil groups and parties. It is clear that the government seeks to confine the probe to establishing that the abductions, detentions, murder and secret disposal of bodies are the product of "misconduct" on the part of an undisciplined minority in the military.

The preliminary investigation does not include grilling the military officers responsible for the crimes committed in concentration camps, nor are those already implicated to be questioned. The way that the probe has been dragged out for over a year leaves no doubt that the intent of the Criminal Investigations Department is to cover up the guilty commanders by intimidating Corporal Rajapaksha and any others among his fellow prisoners who reveal the existence of the mass graves.

As the mass graves of Chemmani expose the true character of the barbaric repression of the oppressed Tamils in the North and the East, the state and the capitalist media have launched a campaign to whitewash the high-ranking military officials and the government.

An article July 18 in the *Divaina*, a Sinhalese daily, argues that the statements of the relatives of the identified victims show that it was Rajapaksha himself who was responsible for the murders. The media continuously argues that it is impolitic to probe the disappearances, for such an investigation would lead to a breakdown in the morale of the officers and men in the armed forces and adversely affect the war effort.

The Peoples Alliance government may now be regretting that, unlike the previous UNP regime that burned thousands of corpses of youth it murdered in the 1987-90 terror in the rural South, it has failed to burn up its own victims in the northern theater.



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