

More evidence of army torture and murder dug up in northern Sri Lanka

Priyadarshana Meddawaththa
13 October 1999

Fourteen skeletons of Tamil youths, killed and buried by the Sri Lankan security forces, were found last September during the exhumation of graves at Chemmani, in the suburbs of Jaffna, in northern Sri Lanka. The skeletons are believed to have belonged to Tamil youths who disappeared after the army recaptured Jaffna during a renewed war drive against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) in 1995-96.

A convicted army corporal first revealed existence of the mass graves at a High Court hearing in Colombo in June 1998. But the Peoples Alliance (PA) government only reluctantly agreed in June this year to establish an inquiry into the allegations after continuous agitation by Tamils, especially the parents of disappeared youths.

During the first stage of the inquiry, on June 15 and 16, army corporal Somaratna Rajapaksha was taken to Jaffna to show the local magistrate and forensic experts where the bodies were buried. On August 30, Rajapaksha, along with four other ex-soldiers, was flown to Jaffna for the second phase. The exhumation began on September 6, after a three-day inquiry into the whereabouts of sites. The ex-soldiers had all been convicted of the rape and murder of a high school girl. They also killed the girl's mother, younger brother and a relative. The soldiers said that they were eyewitnesses to other killings ordered by high-ranking military officers.

During the inquiry on August 30, Rajapaksha accused the government authorities of not fully investigating his claims. He told the magistrate that Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officials or the military police had failed to even record the names of high-ranking army officials, who, he claimed, were involved in the killings. He also said that he had seen signs of tampering with the gravesites.

Rajapaksha also told the inquiry that he was concerned at the attempt by Colombo newspapers to smear and intimidate him. The July 18 edition of Sinhala weekly, *Divaina*, carried a headline: "Cat's paw digs up Chemmani Graves". "Rajapaksha's fairy tales deceived only the Tamils of Jaffna," the newspaper declared. His evidence "provided a good weapon for the Tigers who stood behind them. It is the cat's paws of the Tigers that stampeded the international organizations. Right throughout, the Tiger organisation has schemed to discredit the defence forces and slander the state," it added.

On September 1, Rajapaksha was to accompany the other ex-soldiers to the gravesites but he refused. He complained to the magistrate that he was being denied legal aid and being questioned by the state counsel and CID with the aim of incriminating him in the murders. He agreed to participate only after the magistrate warned the state counsel. On the third and final day, after locating more gravesites, Rajapaksha asked the magistrate to provide him with legal aid, when questioned by CID officials, and also security for himself and his family.

Ex-soldiers called as witnesses pointed out 25 sites, provided descriptions of the youths killed, and took the magistrate to some of their homes. They said that army officers and soldiers had used trucks to transport the youths—some of whom were still alive—to the gravesites. Many of the victims were naked or in their underwear. The living were killed and all the bodies then buried. The ex-soldiers were flown back to Colombo at the end of the three-day inquiry and were not present when the exhumations began on September 6. Neither were the media, who had been permitted to observe the earlier excavations.

On the same day, P. Selvarajah, president of the

Union of Parents of Disappeared Children (UPDC), who had visited the gravesites to witness the exhumations was arrested. The pretext was that a grenade had been found near his home. He was taken to regiment 512 and questioned for hours. He was only released after the UPDC, human rights organisations in Jaffna and the magistrate himself protested against the arrest describing it as an attempt to intimidate witnesses and those sympathetic to the investigation.

Only one of the sites identified by Rajapaksha, a ditch 15 feet square and 6 feet deep, west of road off Jaffna-Kandy highway was excavated on September 6. Rajapaksha said 15 bodies were buried at Chemmani junction. On September 7 a caterpillar machine dug up parts from two skeletons; the next day, a skull and some bones were found; and on September 9 three skeletons were dug up.

Professor Chandrasiri Niriella, a forensic scientist, said that one of the skeletons was a woman. A nose stud of the type worn by Tamil women, fragments of hair, a hair pin, a blue underskirt, a man's suspender and other material were found near the three skeletons. Rajapaksha had previously explained that a couple, whose skulls were smashed with clubs, was buried at the location.

Professor Niriella concluded that blunt weapons had fractured the skulls. The female skeleton is suspected to be that of a woman who was arrested at Ariyalai while watching TV with her husband. The magistrate has ordered that a resident of the house be summoned to help identify the remains.

Further exhumations were carried out on September 13, near the Chemmani salterns. Rajapaksha, who pointed out this site, said that 30 Tamil youth from Achchuveli and Kaithadi were buried there. They had been arrested by the military, brought to the Ariyalai torture camp on a tractor, tortured and then struck down with iron bars and spades. Excavations were halted in this area after it was reported that no skeletons or other evidence had been found.

Another soldier, private M. Jayatilake reported another location where around 50 murdered Tamil youth were alleged to have been buried. Jayatilake said that he and several other soldiers had been ordered by Lieutenant Tudugala, Captain Lafir and Captain Nasser to bury the bodies.

The Union of Parents of Disappeared Children

(UPDC) are concerned that the lengthy delay in starting the investigation has allowed the Sri Lankan security forces time to cover up their crimes. It pointed out that local residents witnessed columns of smoke rising from the Chemmani area in September last year.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact