

Dozens of Sri Lankan refugees killed in artillery attack on church

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10 December 1999

An artillery attack on a Catholic church in Madhu in the Sri Lankan district of Mannar on November 20 resulted in the death of 42 Tamil civilians and serious injuries to another 61. According to the International Aid Agency, some were killed on the spot while another nine died on the way to Vavuniya hospital. Thirteen of the dead were children.

In his eyewitness account, the Bishop of Mannar, Rayappu Joseph, stated that the bombardment began at about 10pm as about 300 Sri Lankan Army (SLA) soldiers were entering the shrine compound. "There were over 3,500 civilians who had come there seeking refuge and all of them were sleeping in the main shrine building and the adjoining sacred heart chapel."

He also pointed to the historical character of the church: "Besides the destruction of the sacred heart chapel, a section of the main shrine has suffered extensive damage. The whole church of Mannar and of Sri Lanka are so sad that this sacred place, so dear to the Catholics and to all citizens of this country had come under such a desecration never heard of in its 450 years of history."

Most of the medical staff, including 18 doctors, had already fled the Mannar Government Hospital as a result of heavy fighting, which began in Vavuniya during the first week of November. As a result, only a District Medical Officer (DMO), Dr Kathirgamana, was available to carry out postmortem duties on the 31 bodies left in Madhu Church.

Both the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have accused each other of carrying out the attack on the church. The shelling came just two days after the LTTE had captured Madhu and the surrounding areas to the west of Wanni as part of its military offensive, which has left the Sri Lankan Army reeling, disorganised and desperate.

In reply to government accusations, the LTTE stated: "In agreement with the church authorities, the LTTE kept the area demilitarised in respect to the sacredness of the sanctuary... The Sri Lankan military has occupied the church premises and was firing artillery indiscriminately in the area."

The Sri Lankan security forces attempted to prevent an investigation by the Mannar magistrate of the incident. Military and police officials initially refused to grant permission and provide security for the investigative team to go beyond Piramanalankulam, 12 kilometres from Madhu. But they had to reverse the decision when ordered by the magistrate to contact their superiors.

The Defence Ministry has made every attempt to cover the fact that the army entered the church and initially denied that the Madhu Matha (Mother of Madhu) shrine had been damaged. Only after their crude falsifications were exposed did officials turn their attack on the LTTE claiming it had carried out the attack—allegations that were dutifully repeated in the Colombo press.

But the overwhelming evidence of eyewitnesses points to the fact that a substantial number of Sri Lankan Army troops entered the church prior to the attack. A wounded civilian in Vavuniya hospital said that "a special commando unit of the Sri Lankan army stormed into the defenseless church premises" and used "thousands of refugees as a human shield". Whoever fired the shells, and that is by no means clear, the army's actions turned the church into a military target and endangered the lives of thousands of refugees.

During the magistrate's inquiry, S. Ehambaran also explained how the mortar shell attack took place. "Around 8 o'clock on the night of November 20, I heard gunshots. Around 10pm there were heavy shell

attacks. I could not guess what happened within such a short time. As soon as the shell exploded on the Madhu Church, army men entered and began taking away the injured to the hospitals. Before the explosion, army men asked us to stay within the church premises. So I can't be sure who is responsible for these shell attacks."

Chandramohan Suganthini, who lost all her four children, described the attack: "Since last November 18, I was displaced and was staying at Madhu Church with my four children. The first shell fell on our church. Following this we began crying. After this attack, with the help of many others who were in the church, we collected and arranged the scattered bodies. Later on we put them in a line. I screamed when I found the bodies of my four children. My head was reeling. I got confused."

Earlier in the year, the Sri Lankan army seized the Madhu area and occupied the church premises driving the LTTE forces away. The government portrayed this "victory" as a liberating act and used it to woo Catholic votes during the provincial council elections. The army only left the church after Catholic leaders insisted that it be demilitarised.



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