

SLMM report exposes Sri Lankan military's complicity in violence and murder

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The Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the 2002 ceasefire between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), issued a report last week pointing to the Sri Lankan military's involvement in escalating violence and murders in the North and East of the island.

The SLMM was assigned to produce the report following negotiations between the government and the LTTE in Geneva in February, where both sides reaffirmed their support for the ceasefire agreement. The report was due to be submitted to a further round of talks in Geneva in April, which was cancelled amid growing violence involving both sides.

As a result, the report was prepared for the limited talks that were to be convened in Oslo on June 8-9. It was signed by SLMM head Major General Ulf Henricsson and dated June 4 but not released prior to the meeting. According to the *Sunday Times*, the government was furious at the contents and threatened to withdraw its delegation if it were tabled prior to, or during, the talks. As it turned out, the delegations never met in Oslo (see: "Oslo talks between Sri Lankan government and LTTE collapse").

The SLMM report is a cautious diplomatic document, which cites breaches of the ceasefire agreement by both sides. As far as the Colombo government is concerned, however, an evenhanded approach is anathema. According to its propaganda, all the blame for the present eruption of violence rests with the "terrorist" LTTE, while the military has had no hand in attacks on LTTE cadre and supporters. On this basis, the government issued a statement condemning the SLMM for pro-LTTE bias.

The government is furious that an official SLMM document has punctured these claims. As part of the 2002 ceasefire, the Colombo government agreed to take measures "to ensure that no armed group or person other than government security forces will carry arms or conduct armed operations in GOSL [government of Sri Lanka] controlled areas". It reaffirmed this clause at the Geneva talks and denied LTTE allegations that the Sri Lankan military was

complicit in attacks by anti-LTTE paramilitaries.

The report provided a significant body of evidence establishing the connection between the military and the murderous activities of Tamil militias. Moreover, the SLMM highlighted the fact that the violence worsened sharply following a particularly provocative murder carried out by anti-LTTE forces. V. Vigneswaran, a prominent pro-LTTE Tamil politician was shot dead in Trincomalee on April 7.

The report stated: "Although the level of violence decreased drastically after the decision was taken to resume high-level talks [in February], the situation became very tense again following the assassination of the Trincomalee District President of Tamil Peoples Forum on 7 April 2006. The killing triggered a resumption of attacks against the GOSL forces, which began with hand grenade and claymore mine attacks, notably in the East."

The SLMM hinted at the complicity of the security forces in the assassination. "The cold blooded killing of this prominent member of the Tamil society close to major police and defence installations raised serious doubts about GOSL capability to maintain law and order," it noted. The report could also have pointed out that the Sri Lankan police have not detained anyone in connection with this murder, or any other attacks on LTTE supporters since November, when Rajapakse won the presidential election.

Vigneswaran's murder was not an isolated case. "In Jaffna more than 43 civilians were assassinated after the 10th of April in a virtual campaign of targeted killings. On several occasions these killings took place within close vicinity of a permanent SF [security forces] presence. Yet, they denied witnessing any of these killings," the SLMM stated.

The report cited specific cases of anti-LTTE militia launching attacks from government territory. "[The] SLMM was able to verify three attacks where the perpetrators [of anti-LTTE operations] either came from or fled to GOSL controlled areas: the attacks on the LTTE checkpoint in Vanuvateevu on the 2nd of March, the attack on the LTTE checkpoint in Poonagar, Mahindapura on the 23rd of March and the attack on the LTTE post in Panichchankerni on the

6th of April.”

The SLMM directly contradicted the government’s claims that the Karuna group (an LTTE breakaway) has not operated from government-controlled areas. “The only clearly identified armed group is the Karuna faction and their political front TMVP who, contrary to the GOSL commitment, became even more visible in GOSL controlled areas in the East in March. SLMM has been direct contact with Karuna supporters and TMVP members and their presence and activities are often confirmed by GOSL officials,” it stated.

The SLMM reported: “There are a number of indications that the GOSL is actively supporting the Karuna group. Known Karuna supporters have been seen moving to and from SLA [Sri Lankan army] camps, and it is evident that the security forces and police in some areas are not taking action to prevent armed elements from operating... SLMM inquiries into incidents of armed violence against civilians strongly indicate that SLA and Army intelligence are supporting armed groups in Vavuniya district.”

The SLMM cited a specific incident where it was denied access by the military to 10 wounded Karuna cadres brought to a government hospital following an LTTE attack on their camp in eastern Batticaloa district on April 30. The army’s actions were a breach of the ceasefire agreement and suggest that it was concerned to prevent the SLMM finding out about its relations with the Karuna camp.

The report noted that SLMM access had been further restricted after the monitors accused military personnel of collusion in murder. “The SLMM also faces problems when patrolling in GOSL areas. Since the SLMM’s press release on 29 April regarding the GOSL’s involvement in extrajudicial killing, the SLMM has on several occasions been denied access through checkpoints and exit/entry points.” As the SLMM noted, the decision came from the top. “Security Forces on the ground claim that they act upon orders from Colombo.”

The SLMM stated that the military had failed to collaborate with its investigations. “As for the GOSL, both security forces and police were restrictive when it came to the SLMM inquiring into alleged activities by armed groups, especially in Vavuniya. It has also been very difficult for the SLMM to inquire into the disappearance of four civilians following the attack on a Navy bus in Pesalai, Mannar on 23 December 2005. The Sri Lankan Navy, who are accused of being behind the disappearance, has been completely unwilling to cooperate with the SLMM to bring clarity to the case.”

Of course, the SLMM report also indicted the LTTE for attacks on military personnel, which had resulted in the deaths of 88. It dismissed the LTTE’s denials, declaring that

“the number of attacks, the targets, the tactics used, and geographic dimension pointed towards the LTTE as the perpetrator”. The SLMM also accused the LTTE of intensifying “child recruitment and child abduction” to bolster its forces, in breach of its undertaking in Geneva.

The report condemned the LTTE’s suicide bombing on army headquarters in central Colombo on April 25 and blamed the LTTE for provoking a major naval battle on May 11 that endangered the life of one of the ceasefire monitors. At the same time, however, it noted the disproportionate and aggressive response of the military to these attacks. “In retaliation the Sri Lankan Armed forces on 25 and 26 April attacked the LTTE-controlled area of Sampur and Ilakkantai by using air and artillery capabilities to strike military and political targets of the LTTE. Approximately 15 civilians were killed in these actions,” it stated.

There is no doubt that the LTTE has been involved in violent attacks on the military and its paramilitary allies. But what the SLMM report makes clear is that the chief responsibility for the escalating violence rests with the Sri Lankan government and military, which have collaborated with Tamil paramilitary groups in goading the LTTE into retaliating.

The report, even though cautious in its language and approach, punctures the myth cultivated in the local and international media of Rajapakse as a model of restraint in the face of LTTE provocations. Incapable of resolving the political and social crisis confronting his government, the president, like generations of Colombo politicians before him, is deliberately stirring up communal tensions to divide working people and, in doing so, plunging the country back to war.



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