

Aid workers murdered execution style in Sri Lanka

Shantha Ajithan
12 August 2006

In the aftermath of fierce fighting between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the control of the eastern town of Muttur, the bodies of 17 aid workers were found on August 5. All but two had killed execution style with a shot to the back of the head. The cold-blooded murders have provoked outrage in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The aid workers were attached to the French-based Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger) or ACF, which has worked in Sri Lanka since 1996. In the Muttur area, ACF was involved in supplying clean water and promoting economic activity to assist victims of the 2004 tsunami. All but one of the dead were Tamils and most were young.

On August 1, the group travelled by ferry from Trincomalee to Muttur but were unable to return immediately as planned after LTTE fighters entered and took control of parts of the town. Muttur is strategically located on the road to Mavilaru where the army had launched a major offensive to seize an irrigation sluice gate. The military responded with heavy rocket and artillery fire forcing tens of thousands of Muttur residents to flee.

The ACF lost contact with the aid workers who were at its Muttur office until August 4, when the military retook the town. News of the murders only emerged the following day. The army refused to allow anyone near the office, claiming that the LTTE had laid mines.

A fact-finding mission by the Consortium of Humanitarian Agency that reached Muttur on August 6 found 15 of the bodies outside the ACF office. "The bodies were all face downwards on the front lawn, seemingly lined up and shot at very close range. The sight was too much to handle," a representative stated. The bodies of two others were recovered from a car, suggesting they were killed while trying to flee.

ACF officials arrived in Muttur on August 7 and confirmed the deaths. A press statement the following day declared: "Now that it is clear this was a mass murder targetting clearly identified humanitarian workers, ACF is determined not to settle for vague answers from the parties to the conflict... and will demand exemplary punishment." The workers had all been wearing ACF t-shirts and the Muttur office was identified with signs and flags.

The government and the LTTE have both condemned the murders and blamed each other. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told CNN on August 7 that a special police team would investigate the murders. While he claimed to have evidence that the LTTE had killed the aid workers and other civilians in Muttur, none has been made public.

At this stage, it is not certain who was responsible, but all the signs point to the Sri Lankan military or associated Tamil paramilitaries that have carried out a series of provocative killings since the beginning of the year.

On the face of it, the LTTE had no obvious reason to kill the ACF workers. On the other hand, the military and various Sinhala chauvinist organisation have frequently denounced non-government organisations (NGO) such as ACF, working in island's war zones, allegedly supporting the LTTE. It is quite possible that the military exacted revenge on the Tamil aid workers in reprisal for the LTTE's humiliating capture of Muttur.

Already there are signs of a cover-up underway. A Reuters report noted the contradictory statements of the Sri Lankan security forces. Military spokesman Major Upali Rajapakse told the news agency that the bodies had been found when the army retook the town. But when the Reuters correspondent visited Muttur on

August 5, military commanders on the spot had made no mention of the dead aid workers, suggesting they had died later.

The security forces have been sensitive about the postmortems. The bodies were taken to Trincomalee hospital for examination on August 7. The judicial medical officer (JMO) was on leave so the government brought in a replacement from Anuradhapura in North Central Province. Sources at Trincomalee hospital told the WSWs that the procedure was unusual—normally the hospital director would fill in for an absent JMO.

The police also went to great lengths to prevent the media from obtaining information about the postmortems. *Lakbima* reported on August 9 that journalists had been subjected to police threats. When asked, deputy inspector general Rohan Abewardhana justified the measures by saying that reporters had been distorting information and creating trouble for the military and the government.

The relatives of the dead were in no doubt that the military was responsible. The father of one of the murdered aid workers told the WSWs that his son had left for Trincomalee on August 1 for the Muttur office, promising to return the same day. “Late on Thursday [August 3] evening, my son spoke to me over the phone. While he was speaking, I could hear the shelling,” he said.

“We heard news that some NGO workers had been arrested by the security forces who entered Muttur after the LTTE pulled out from there. We tried to contact my son but communication had totally collapsed. We approached the aid agency but even they had no communication with their staff. On Saturday we heard a news item on the radio that the aid workers had been killed. No one, including the aid agency, was allowed to enter Muttur.”

A neighbour asked: “Why did the government bring a doctor from outside just for these postmortems when others were carried out by doctors here [in Trincomalee]. When you take the history of the Sri Lankan army, it has been routine to crack down on the civilian population immediately after a clash. That is what happened at Pesalai Mannar [where the navy recently shot five fishermen]. This may be the same.”

Richard Arulrajh, whose 24-year-old son was among those murdered, told Reuters: “We believe it was the army [that killed the aid workers]. On Friday [August

4], he phoned and said he would be back by Saturday. After that we heard that the military came and shot them.”

Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe declared at a press conference on Wednesday that the government would conduct an impartial inquiry and not cover up the crime. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) is to carry out an investigation with the assistance of Australian forensic experts. Significantly he did not repeat earlier claims that the LTTE was responsible.

While welcoming the investigation, Brad Adams, Asian director of the US-based Human Rights Watch, noted: “There have been too many cases where the government said it would bring perpetrators to justice and then the process stalled. This time it must be different.”

* In early January, the military were implicated in the execution-style murder of five Tamil youth in Trincomalee. The government promised an inquiry but it was ultimately abandoned.

* In May, eight people, including a young child, were killed by gunmen at Allaipiddy near the Jaffna peninsula. Evidence pointed to the involvement of naval personnel, but the police inquiry was such a farce that a local magistrate rebuked officers for failing to carry out elementary procedures.

* In June, the navy was directly implicated in the murder of five fishermen and an elderly woman. An official inquiry established the involvement of naval personnel, but the government and the military have failed to take any disciplinary action against them.

There is no reason to believe that the latest inquiry into the Muttur massacre will be any less of a whitewash than previous ones.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact