

Sri Lankan air force bombing kills scores of students

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Amid escalating fighting between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan air force bombed a school compound in the LTTE-held Mullaittivu district yesterday, killing 61 students and injuring more than 100.

The LTTE peace secretariat said the students were mainly girls between 15 and 18 attending a two-day residential course on first aid at the Chencholai children's home in Vallipunam when warplanes attacked the buildings around 7.00 a.m. The wounded were taken to the Mullaittivu and Kilinochchi hospitals, but a number died later.

The military has sought to deny responsibility for this crime with lies and evasions. Defence sources initially admitted to Reuters that the air force had attacked LTTE-held territory in Mullaittivu, but refused to give any details of the targets. As news of the bombing was publicised internationally, air force spokesman Group Captain Ajantha Silva told Associated Press that the military had proof that this place was an LTTE base.

In its statement, the defence ministry denied that the air force had attacked civilian targets. "The Sri Lankan Air Force bombed at pre-identified LTTE gun positions and LTTE camps in the Mullaittivu area this morning, Monday August 14," it declared. "Air Force personnel confirmed that the bombings were precise and well targeted."

Speaking on Sirasa TV, Ulf Henricsson, head of the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), contradicted the military's claims. He said he had seen the bodies of children when he visited the scene yesterday. At least 10 bombs had been dropped, including an unexploded one. Henricsson said he saw no LTTE military camps in the area.

UN spokeswoman Orla Clinton told the media that investigators confirmed at least 19 students had been killed in the attack, adding that the agency was

investigating further. "What we know at the moment is that these seem to have been students between 16 and 18, A-level students, from the Kilinochchi and Mullaittivu areas, who were on a two-day training course in first aid," she said.

Confronted with mounting evidence of a slaughter, the government denied that children were being deliberately targeted, accusing the LTTE of using them as "human shields" and even suggesting they were receiving military training. "It is a lie to say that schoolchildren were targeted," government spokesperson Chandrapala Liyanage told AFP. "The air force bombed a LTTE training centre. We don't know if they moved child soldiers there."

It is not clear whether the attack was deliberate. The buildings had previously been used as an orphanage and, if as the military claim, the targets were "pre-identified," the presence of a large number of children would have been obvious. Having initiated offensive operations against the LTTE, the bombing could well be part of the military's efforts to terrorise the Tamil minority in the North and East.

Over the weekend, fighting spread to the northern Jaffna peninsula with a number of LTTE attacks on army positions, including an artillery barrage on the strategic Palaly air base. Defence sources told AFP that 60 soldiers had been killed since last Friday as the army sought to recapture bunkers and ground lost to the LTTE. The government claimed to have killed 200 LTTE fighters.

The attack in Mullaittivu was not an isolated incident. On Sunday morning, 15 civilians were killed and another 20 wounded by rocket and artillery fire from the Palaly base. They were among hundreds of people taking refuge at St. Philip Nari Church at Allaipiddy about 20 kilometres from Jaffna town. The military was engaged in a battle to regain control of parts of the area lost to the LTTE.

Christian Caritas director Kilinochchi G. Peter told the Catholic newsagency: “[A]n artillery shell hit the church, where people were seeking shelter from the fighting. There are many houses around the church, and people ran to the church to escape the shelling, but one fell on the church. Nobody can enter the area now because of the curfew and fighting is still going on.” The Sri Lankan Red Cross Society reported that their workers had brought several of the injured to the Jaffna hospital.

A government spokesman repeated the same justification for the military’s attacks on civilian areas, declaring that the LTTE were “mingling with civilians and calling in artillery fire” from the army.

The most savage attacks on civilian targets in the recent fighting have been on the eastern town on Muttur. After the LTTE entered and captured parts of the town on August 2, the military unleashed sustained artillery and rocket barrages. Scores of civilians were killed in the shelling, many more were injured and an estimated 40,000 people fled the town.

The LTTE’s attempt to capture Muttur was aimed at cutting the army’s supply lines from military bases in Trincomalee and the army’s operation to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate further south. While insisting that its offensive was limited in scope, the government was well aware that the intrusion into LTTE territory would provoke broader fighting.

Over the weekend, the conflict spread to the North and there have been several attacks in the capital of Colombo. On Saturday, gunmen shot dead the deputy director of the government’s peace secretariat, Ketheshwaran Loganathan, outside his house in the Colombo suburb of Dehiwela. Yesterday, a bomb blast killed at least seven people, including several army commandos escorting the motorcade of Pakistani High Commissioner Bashir Wali Mohamed in central Colombo. The high commissioner said he was being targeted because Pakistan had provided military assistance to Sri Lanka.



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