

Ceasefire monitors declare: Sri Lankan army murdered aid workers

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The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) issued a statement on Wednesday, formally finding the army responsible for the killing of 17 aid workers attached to the French-based Action Contre la Faim (ACF) on August 4. Fifteen of the bodies were found a day later lined up in a row at the ACF compound in the east coast town of Muttur. Each had been shot in the head, execution-style. Two others tried to escape and were shot in the back.

The gruesome murders took place in the wake of intense fighting for control of Muttur between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the military. The LTTE seized parts of the town in a bid to cut supply lines for a major military offensive to seize the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory. On August 1, the LTTE opened the disputed sluice gate and withdrew from Muttur two days later.

From the outset, the Colombo government and the military attempted to blame the ACF murders on the LTTE. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told a press conference in Colombo on August 7: “We have evidence to show that the LTTE were responsible for the massacre of the NGO workers and a large number of civilians.” Following an international outcry, President Mahinda Rajapakse promised a full investigation.

Since August 7, however, there has been a notable silence over the murders. The government, the military and police have issued no statements. There is no sign of a serious police inquiry. No evidence has been made public. Moreover, if there were any indication of LTTE involvement, it would have been leaked to the media and made the basis of a communal hue and cry by Sinhala extremists against the “Tiger terrorists”.

The SLMM, which oversees the 2002 ceasefire, carried out its own investigation. Spokesman

Thorfinnur Ommarson told the press that SLMM staff had interviewed “hospital staff, police, families of the dead workers as well as other witnesses”. In its statement, the SLMM concluded that “there cannot be any other armed groups than the security forces who could actually have been behind the act”.

The military blocked off the area after the killings, preventing ACF officials from retrieving the bodies of their colleagues. The SLMM declared that it “cannot find reasons for the restrictions of movements... acceptable, thereby strongly indicating the GoSL’s [government of Sri Lanka] eagerness to conceal the matter from the SLMM”.

The SLMM noted that by the time of the murders the town was fully under army control. “Taking into consideration the fact that the security forces had been present in Muttur at the time of the incident, it appears highly unlikely to blame other groups for the killing,” it stated.

The SLMM head Ulf Henricsson concluded the statement by formally ruling that the murders were “a gross violation of the ceasefire by the security forces of Sri Lanka”. It described the murders as “one of the most serious recent crimes against humanitarian aid workers worldwide” and urged the government to stop any violence against civilians.

The SLMM statement provoked a hysterical response from the government and defence establishment. A government statement angrily attacked “the unprofessional and rather irresponsible stand” of the SLMM, claiming “the determination lacks any factual evidence to substantiate its conclusion and is based on misleading inferences”.

Defence spokesman Rambukwella told the media on August 30: “It’s a totally baseless statement. It’s pathetic and it’s biased and they have no right to make

such a statement because they are not professionals in autopsy or post-mortem.” He went on to claim: “According to police reports, the Tamil Tigers were in control of Muttur from August 2-5 and examinations suggested a time of killing between the night of August 3 and the following day.”

Even on the face of it, this threadbare argument is riddled with contradictions. Rambukwella himself told a press conference on August 5: “The army was in full control of Muttur and the question of the LTTE capturing it never arose.” Speaking this week, the defence spokesman provided no evidence as to when, or even if, the LTTE was in control of the area surrounding the ACF compound.

His concern about the time of death does explain a curious fact uncovered by WSWS reporters during their initial inquiries. Staff at the Trincomalee Hospital complained that the usual procedure for performing autopsies had been sidestepped in the case of the aid workers. The hospital’s judicial medical officer was on leave, so the government brought in a replacement from Anuradhapura in North Central Province, rather than allow the hospital director to conduct the procedure.

More significantly, despite their denunciations of the SLMM, the government has answered none of its allegations. Rambukwella made no attempt to explain why the army had blocked off the area. He provided no evidence from witnesses, even from the military. He offered no explanation for the lack of any progress in the police investigation.

There was no obvious motive for the LTTE to kill the aid workers, who provided essential services for the local population. ACF, which had worked in Sri Lanka since 1996, was helping the victims of the 2004 tsunami. On the other hand, Sinhala extremist organisations have frequently denounced non-government organisations operating in the East and North as “LTTE stooges”. The army, which is deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism, would have had no compunction in murdering 17 local ACF workers—16 were Tamil and one was Muslim.

A particularly cynical response to the SLMM statement came from the head of the government’s so-called peace secretariat, Palitha Kohona. He declared it was wrong for the SLMM to make such a determination while the murders were still under police investigation.

The Sri Lankan police are notorious for its failure to investigate crimes carried out by the security forces or associated paramilitary groups. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued statements criticising the lack of proper investigations into previous atrocities.

The cold-blooded killing of aid workers in Muttur is not an isolated incident, but is part and parcel of the methods of harassment, arbitrary arrest, torture and murder employed by the security forces to terrorise the local population. The military’s response to the LTTE incursion into Muttur was a barrage of rockets and artillery fire, which, according to local residents, killed scores of people.

The indiscriminate use of air strikes and artillery was underscored by an air force attack on a compound in Mullaittivu on August 14 that killed up to 61 teenage girls and injured over 100 who were attending a two-day first aid course. As details of the incident became public, the military and the government declared that the target had been an LTTE training camp and the dead were “child soldiers”. The claims were contradicted not only by the LTTE, but by SLMM and UNICEF officials who visited the site.

These atrocities flow directly from the character of the war that the Rajapakse government has launched, which is aimed not only at destroying the LTTE militarily but at cowing the Tamil minority as a whole. Those responsible are not just the soldiers who pulled the triggers and the pilots who dropped the bombs but the military chiefs and government ministers who are directing the war. All of those involved should be charged and prosecuted for war crimes.



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