

Sri Lankan military bombards refugee camp, killing dozens

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Dozens of displaced civilians were killed yesterday when the Sri Lankan military unleashed an artillery barrage on a refugee camp at Kathiraveli near Vakarai in the eastern Batticaloa district. Among the dead and injured were women, children and elderly. The killing of Tamil refugees is the latest atrocity carried out by the army this year as it escalates its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The LTTE announced that 45 people were killed in the attack and another 125 injured. Several others later died of their wounds. Medical staff in the Batticaloa and Valachchenai hospitals told the media that about 70 people had been admitted, including 17 children. The camp, which had been recently established at the Kathiraveli Vikneswara school, held about 3,000 refugees, many of whom fled army offensives to the north in Muttur and Sampur in August and September.

Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella conceded that the attack had taken place, but defended the military's actions. "While we regret this whole episode, we also must say that national security is uppermost in our minds," he told the media.

The military was unapologetic, accusing the LTTE of using civilians as "human shields". Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told the *Daily News* the army had simply responded to attacks on its own camps by bombarding LTTE mortar and artillery positions, identified using radar.

None of these claims has been supported by the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the 2002 ceasefire agreement. SLMM spokeswoman Helen Olafsdottir told the WWSW that its members had counted 23 bodies on the site. "They [the monitors] went to the impact site. It is a school in Kathiraveli. There is a camp for internally displaced persons (IDP). The people who died were civilians, mainly women,

children and old people."

Olafsdottir was sceptical of the army's claims. "We did not see any sign of a military installation in the camp area. We can't confirm that the LTTE had been shooting from this area. But there was no indication of that." According to eyewitnesses, about 40 rounds had been fired into the school. Olafsdottir later told the media that the SLMM "would certainly like some answers from the military regarding the nature and reasons of this attack".

Amnesty International condemned the attack as a serious violation of international law and human rights, and demanded an investigation. "It is appalling that the military should attack a camp for displaced people—these are civilians who have already been forced from their homes because of the conflict," Amnesty International's Asian Pacific director Purna Sen said.

Norway's international development minister Erick Solheim, who has been closely involved in the so-called peace process, expressed concerns about the attack, but did not condemn it. "I am very troubled by the government's onslaught in Vakarai, in the eastern part of Sri Lanka," he said. "I am extremely disappointed that the parties are not honouring the promises that they made in Geneva a week and a half ago to refrain from launching any military offensives."

The peace talks in Geneva were, however, a complete failure. The Sri Lankan government has launched repeated offensives since late July in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire, capturing significant tracts of territory from the LTTE. Its delegation refused to consider the LTTE's minimal demand for a reopening of the major highway to the northern Jaffna peninsula as a step toward ending the current fighting.

The international powers overseeing the "peace

process”—the US, the EU, Norway and Japan—have issued no condemnation of the military’s offensives or its atrocities, thus tacitly encouraging the government to intensify the operations. As part of the war, the security forces have been carrying out a systematic campaign to terrorise the entire population in the war zones of the North and East.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), about 11,000 families or 42,880 displaced persons are living in the Vaharai area, which includes Kathiraveli. Most are living in appalling conditions because the military has blocked all but the most limited humanitarian assistance. The area has been subject to repeated air raids and artillery attacks by government forces and LTTE retaliation.

After making gains in Mavilaru and Sampur, the army has been pressing to make further inroads against the LTTE. The army has appealed to refugees at Kathiraveli, which is inside LTTE territory, to cross over into government-controlled areas, but few have done so. In all likelihood, yesterday’s attack was designed to cause a stampede to open the way for a further offensive into the area.

The atrocity at Kathiraveli is not an isolated case. On August 14, the air force attacked the Chencholai children’s home in Vallipunam in Mullaitivu district, killing 61 students and injuring more than 100. Although the SLMM and UNICEF representatives confirmed that the victims were students, the government and the military maintained the lie that the dead were “child soldiers”.

On November 2, the air force attacked the LTTE-stronghold of Kilinochichi. Some of the bombs fell within 500 metres of the town’s hospital, forcing about 500 patients to flee. The air raid destroyed a house, killing five people on the spot. Military claimed that its warplanes targetted and destroyed LTTE gun emplacements several kilometres from the hospital. But the SLMM confirmed that the bombs had damaged the hospital’s ceilings and windows and the nearby house.

The air raid on Kilinochichi was particularly provocative, coming just days after the Geneva talks. It makes a mockery of President Mahinda Rajapakse’s claims to be adhering to the ceasefire and restricting the military to “defensive” actions. The security forces are engaged in a communal war against the LTTE to suppress any opposition, particularly from the Tamil

minority.

On Monday, Rajapakse announced the formation of a committee to probe human rights violations. He appointed the 15-member committee in the face of increasing popular outrage and pressure from human rights groups over the mounting number of abductions, murders and disappearances linked to the military. Despite repeated calls for an international inquiry, Rajapakse has accorded only observer status to international human rights groups.

The shelling of the Kathiraveli refugee camp, just two days later, makes clear that Rajapakse has no intention of reining in the military.



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