

# Hundreds dead as Sri Lankan military creates humanitarian disaster

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The Sri Lankan military offensive aimed at destroying the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has produced a humanitarian crisis for hundreds of thousands of people trapped by the fighting. While journalists are barred from the front lines, reports are filtering out of hundreds of civilian deaths, with many more injured and in need of urgent medical help.

After the capture of the last LTTE stronghold of Mullaithivu on Sunday, the army has been tightening its noose around LTTE fighters, who are now confined to an area—some 25 kilometres by 10 kilometres—to the north of the town. As has been the case in the previous 30 months of fighting, the military is resorting to the indiscriminate use of artillery and aerial bombardment to weaken the LTTE and terrorise the local population.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stated yesterday that hundreds of civilians have been killed in recent days. The estimate was based on body counts by ICRC staff at local hospitals. Access for aid workers is very limited and the toll could be far higher. The ICRC reported that the military had refused permission to evacuate 200 critically wounded people yesterday and warned that without urgent treatment they would die.

ICRC head of operations for South Asia, Jacques de Maio, told the media: "People are being caught in the crossfire, hospitals and ambulances have been hit by shelling, and several aid workers have been injured while evacuating the wounded. When the dust settles, we may see countless victims and a terrible humanitarian situation."

Speaking of the trapped civilians, de Maio said: "They find themselves simply under fire and highly vulnerable. Access to medical care is almost non-existent at this point. They are in need of food, they are in need of shelter and most of all they are in need of security." Much of the fighting had been "intrinsically incompatible with full respect of the basic rules of the law of war," he said.

The ICRC had negotiated with the military and LTTE to establish a "safe zone" in the Mullaithivu district, but the area has not been spared from attack. The *Independent* reported today that the safe area had been attacked twice already. UN workers reported that about 20 people had been killed.

Speaking from Colombo yesterday, UN spokesman Gordon Weiss said: "This is a serious crisis. Our staff were in a designated safe area

and there was incoming fire from artillery shells. There were shells which killed and wounded dozens, the last of which was Monday morning when 10 people were killed and many more were wounded. They have seen this first hand."

The *New York Times* today cited a UN memo sent by their aid workers in the "safe zone" after shells landed on Saturday and Sunday. "Our team on the ground was certain the shell came from the Sri Lankan military, but apparently in response to an LTTE shell. All around them was the carnage of casualties from people who may have thought they would be safer being near the UN. Sadly they were wrong that night," it stated.

Media coverage of the crisis is sketchy. Since re-launching the war against the LTTE in July 2006, the government and military have banned journalists from the fighting areas and imposed what amounts to a blackout on all news unfavourable to the army's offensives. Journalists even mildly critical of the military and government have been threatened, abducted and killed by military-sponsored death squads.

The military routinely denies allegations of atrocities and, like the Israeli armed forces, blames the LTTE for using civilians as "human shields". But for all its protestations of not targetting civilians, the army is deeply imbued with anti-Tamil chauvinism and regards the Tamil minority as a whole as the enemy. The military has established a cordon around the battle zone, interrogating anyone who attempts to flee, detaining anyone regarded as an LTTE suspect and barring basic humanitarian supplies, including medicines, from entering.

Other reports point to a major disaster. On Saturday, Imelda Sukumar, the government agent, or chief administrative officer, in Mullaithivu district told the BBC that about 100 people had been killed by shelling in the week before her departure last Thursday. Wary of retribution, she cautiously indicated that the military was responsible. A military spokesman denied the army was responsible and denounced Sukumar for speaking to the media.

On Monday, the *Daily Mirror* reported an urgent appeal by the director of the Mullaithivu regional health services, Dr T. Vartharajah. He called for urgent medical supplies, saying more than 300 people had been killed by rocket fire from multi-barrel launchers and many more had been injured.

Dr T. Sathiyamoorthy, a government health official, told today's

*New York Times* that the makeshift hospital he had set up in the village of Udayarkattu had been shelled on Sunday. About 1,000 displaced civilians were sheltering in the hospital compound when it was hit by a shell. Four people were killed instantly. In the past two days, 33 bodies have been brought to the hospital and three patients bled to death. There are no surgeons.

Dr Sathiyamoorthy warned that more of his 100 wounded patients would die. "We have to send them to a safe place, and only then we can move. Unfortunately, the attack is still going on. We are in a fearful situation. We are in a helpless situation," he told the newspaper by phone.

The humanitarian disaster unfolding in northern Sri Lanka has prompted expressions of concern by the UN, the European Union and India. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement on Monday declaring that he was "deeply concerned about the safety and well-being of civilians caught in intensified fighting in the Wannu region of Sri Lanka".

India's foreign minister, Pranab Mukherjee, was in Colombo yesterday for talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government. He was reported in the Indian media as saying that he had requested basic efforts "to help civilians and ensure their safety and security". The Indian government is facing mounting pressure from its political allies in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where popular anger is mounting over the fate of Tamils in neighbouring Sri Lanka.

All these statements are completely hypocritical. For the past two and a half years, the "international community" has tacitly allowed the government to flout the 2002 ceasefire and trample on basic democratic rights. The sponsors of the so-called peace process, including the EU, issued not a word of protest when President Rajapakse tore up the ceasefire agreement, rejected any peace negotiations and vowed to destroy the LTTE militarily. Both India and the US have assisted the Sri Lankan military with intelligence, training and equipment to fight the LTTE.

Rajapakse is well aware that he has the support of the major powers, above all the US, to ruthlessly wage his communal war. After resuming offensive operations in 2006, the military first seized all the LTTE's strongholds in the East and concentrated on the North. Following months of bitter fighting, the army captured the LTTE's administrative centre of Kilinochchi on January 2 then in quick succession took the strategic Elephant Pass—the entry point to the northern Jaffna Peninsula—then Mullaithivu.

Rajapakse claims that the "liberation" of the North from the "terrorists" will bring democracy, peace and prosperity. Successive governments in Colombo, however, have waged a 25-year war to entrench the political and economic supremacy of the Sinhala elites at the expense of the Tamil minority and the working class as a whole. The military victories will do nothing to end the island's so-called "ethnic problem" or anti-Tamil discrimination.

The utter disregard for the lives of civilians in the Mullaithivu district is paralleled by contempt for the lives of government soldiers. Rural youth from the country's Sinhala south, forced to join the army

out of poverty and the lack of employment opportunities, have been given three months training and used as cannon fodder to batter down LTTE defences.

As part of its media censorship, the military stopped releasing casualty figures last year. But in response to opposition accusations, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella was compelled to admit earlier this month that 3,000 of the 50,000 soldiers deployed had been killed in the last three months of 2008. Many more have been injured and maimed.

The character of the fighting was revealed when the army showed off its new prize to journalists this week. The military has transformed Mullaithivu into a ghost town. Its 37,000 residents have fled the advancing army and many buildings bore the scars of shelling. The commander of the operation, Brigadier Nandana Udawatte, strutted around the town boasting of his troops' exploits, oblivious to the desolation.

The LTTE has issued few statements on its military setbacks. Last week, spokesman B. Nadesan told the BBC: "In a liberation war it is normal for a force to lose territory and regain the same and achieve freedom... In the past we have withdrawn many times and bounced back to achieve big victories." The LTTE, however, has lost all of its key strongholds, and much of its infrastructure and heavy weaponry, as well as its supply routes from southern India and elsewhere in Asia.

The collapse of the LTTE, however, stems primarily from political, not military, causes. Its perspective of a separatist capitalist statelet in the North and East of Sri Lanka, represented the interests of sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not Tamil workers and farmers, and was based on appealing for support from the major powers. Having been isolated by the "international community," the LTTE was organically incapable of making any appeal to the one social force capable of defending democratic rights—the working class. Instead, it blamed Sinhala workers for the criminal war being waged by the Colombo political establishment.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka is currently campaigning in provincial elections to unite workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—around their common class interests and a socialist program to end the war and defend democratic rights. The SEP is demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East, to establish the political conditions for a unified struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia. We urge all those opposed to the Rajapakse government's reactionary war to support the SEP campaign.



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