

Dozens of civilians killed as Sri Lankan army continues its onslaught

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Despite growing international outrage, Sri Lankan security forces have continued military operations in the northern district of Mullaithivu against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Indiscriminate artillery barrages and aerial bombing have resulted in the deaths of dozens more civilians over the past five days. Around quarter of a million people are trapped in the area without adequate food, shelter or medicine.

UN spokesman Gordon Weiss told the Associated Press that 52 civilians had been killed and 80 wounded on Tuesday alone. Some had been killed inside a government-designated safe zone in the remaining LTTE-held area. The actual figure is likely to be far higher but reports are scanty as the Sri Lankan government bars journalists from the war zone.

Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital, the last remaining medical facility inside LTTE-held territory, was closed after repeatedly coming under artillery fire since Sunday. According to Weiss, 15 UN staff and 81 family members fled on Wednesday after the area was pounded for more than 16 hours of artillery fire.

Weiss said he had received a report that a cluster bomb had hit just outside the hospital. The use of cluster bombs is illegal under international law. Sri Lankan military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara was quick to deny having or using cluster bombs. At this stage the report has not been confirmed.

Sarasi Wijeratne, a spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said that efforts were being made to evacuate around 500 injured

civilians. The Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital had been relocated to Puthumalan, closer to the coast. Obtaining water was a major main problem, Wijeratne said.

The government and the military blame the LTTE for keeping civilians against their will as "human shields." At the same time, however, the government issued a statement earlier this week that it was not responsible for the safety of civilians in LTTE-controlled areas. As has taken place in other areas, the military's objective is clear: to stampede civilians and transform the entire area into a free-fire zone.

While criticising the LTTE for preventing civilians from leaving, Human Rights Watch spokesman Brad Adams condemned the government's attitude, saying: "The Sri Lankan government knows full well that the civilians caught up in the current fighting are dangerously trapped. The government shows callous indifference by saying civilians should not expect the government to consider their safety and security."

Amnesty International called this week for a temporary humanitarian truce and the creation of humanitarian corridors to allow trapped civilians to leave and relief supplies to enter. Hundreds of thousands of people are completely dependent on outside aid. The last shipment of food went into the area on January 29.

Amnesty International spokeswoman Yolanda Foster said: "The situation for civilians in the Wannu is unacceptable. People cannot move safely, even to collect the bodies of dead relatives, and the injured have no hospitals. A quarter of a million people are suffering without adequate food and shelter while shells

rain down upon them. Most of those who have managed to escape the conflict have not received adequate hospital treatment."

The UN's World Food Program (WFP) yesterday warned of an impending food crisis in the Wannu. A WFP convoy was due to enter the area on Thursday but government officials failed to give it the necessary clearance. WFP spokeswoman Emilla Casella said it would be a week before another attempt could be made. "We don't have any more stocks to be distributed [inside the area], and our staff is essentially hiding at the moment," she said.

Sinhala extremists have responded hysterically to the limited news of the humanitarian disaster filtering out from aid groups inside the Wannu. Wimal Weerawansa, head of the National Freedom Front (NFF), which is allied to the government, yesterday demanded the expulsion of the head of the ICRC in Colombo, alleging he was an LTTE sympathiser. Yesterday evening, a group of protestors making the same demand pelted the ICRC head office with stones.

The government has flatly rejected all calls for a ceasefire—even from its international backers like the US. On Tuesday, the US, UK, Japan and Norway—the co-chairs of the so-called international peace process in Sri Lanka—called on the LTTE to surrender and on the government to agree to a ceasefire to discuss procedures for a surrender.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse ruled out any halt to the fighting. He told the *Island* on Thursday: "Nothing could be as ridiculous as this ... nothing short of unconditional surrender of arms and cadres [of the LTTE] could bring an end to the offensive on the Wannu front."

Completely indifferent to the plight of civilians, Rajapakse added: "The so-called 'no-fire' period proposed by Co-Chairs to evacuate sick and wounded now trapped in the LTTE-held area would be detrimental to Sri Lanka's efforts to wipe out terrorism."

Over the past few days, the military has announced

the capture of the LTTE strongholds of Vishvamadu and Chalai. Chalai, near Mullaithivu, was a major base for the LTTE's Sea Tigers involved in naval operations and ferrying supplies. The army also claimed to have captured the LTTE's remaining airstrip for light aircraft. Fighting has reportedly been heavy, but the army has not released any casualty figures.

It is clear from the defence secretary's statements that the military intends to crush the LTTE as a military force regardless of the terrible consequences for trapped civilians. Such reckless indifference for innocent civilians constitutes a war crime under international law.



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