

# Sri Lankan war: At least nine dead in shelling of hospital

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The repeated shelling of a hospital at Puthukkudiyiruppu in northern Sri Lanka has again underscored the barbaric character of the war being waged by the Colombo government against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

While the government bars all independent reportage from the war zones, staff of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) based at the hospital, which is inside the small area still controlled by the LTTE, painted a picture of devastation and chaos. The buildings were hit by shells three times on Sunday—first the kitchen, then the church and finally a ward for women and children. Another ward was hit on Monday.

The full extent of the casualties is not yet known. At least nine people were killed and 20 others injured in the first of the four shellings. The makeshift facilities were filled to overflowing with injured and others attempting to find a safe haven from the fighting. According to the ICRC, more than 800 people were sheltering at the hospital, including 500 in-patients, when it was hit for the third time. The hospital has a capacity of only 150 beds.

The ICRC head in Colombo, Paul Castella, protested against the flagrant breaches of international law. "We're shocked that the hospital was hit, and this for the second time in recent weeks. Wounded and sick people, medical personnel and medical facilities are all protected by international humanitarian law. Under no circumstances may they be directly attacked," he stated.

Speaking after the third shelling, UN spokesman Gordon Weiss told the media: "It seems to have struck the pediatric ward, a 30-bed ward filled to overflowing." The last text message received from a distressed UN worker at

the hospital read: "Women and kids wards shelled. God, no words. Still counting the dead bodies."

Despite the chaos, more people, lacking anywhere else to go, were still arriving at the hospital. An unnamed source told the *Hindu* newspaper: "We understand 11 out of the 20 doctors in the hospital have left and those left behind are struggling to cope with the situation. Due to the shortage of supplies, bed sheets are being used for bandaging and operations are being performed without anaesthesia."

The ICRC could not confirm whether the government or the LTTE launched the strikes. However, Dr Thurairajah Varatharajah, the top government health official in the area, told the Associated Press that two of the attacks appeared to have come from the army. He said the shelling had caused extensive damage to the hospital. He told AFP: "It is a very tense situation now. There is no proper power or water supply and staff are spending their time in the bunkers in between treating patients."

The deliberate shelling of the hospital is in line with the methods used by the military over the past 30 months to terrorise the population in LTTE-held areas. Several hundred thousand displaced persons are living in squalid refugee camps. Copying from US military propaganda in Iraq, the Sri Lankan government routinely blames the LTTE for using civilians as "human shields".

The government has responded to news of this latest atrocity with contradictory lies and distortions. Speaking to the BBC, spokesman Lakshman Hulugalle brazenly denied the incident had even occurred. "Actually, this whole issue of shelling at Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital is based on false information. There was no attack in that area... There was no shelling at all."

Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara took another tack, blaming the shelling on the LTTE. "Now the LTTE is firing very desperately every artillery... one of these shells may have fallen into that area." The LTTE, which has been driven into a small pocket of territory in the north-east of the island, has lost much of its military hardware and its supply routes have been severed. Why LTTE would expend its remaining shells randomly firing inside its own territory and alienating the Tamil population, Nanayakkara did not try to explain.

The military on the other hand has a definite motive—to stampede the population and turn the entire area into a free-fire zone. The government announced yesterday that all civilians should get out of the remaining LTTE-held areas and enter a demarcated "safety zone," ominously warning that it "cannot be responsible for the safety and security of civilians still living among LTTE terrorists". A pro-LTTE web site reported that the hospital was shelled after Sri Lankan military commanders demanded that the facility shift to a "safety zone".

The Sri Lankan government accuses the LTTE of preventing civilians from leaving areas under its control. But those who do manage to evade the fighting and reach government-held areas are invariably treated by the security forces as "enemy" and incarcerated in guarded camps. The army maintains a tight cordon around the entire area. Last week, aid agencies were prevented from transporting badly injured patients to hospitals in government-held areas.

The ICRC and UN were finally permitted to bring 226 sick and wounded patients, including 51 children, to Vavuniya hospital last Thursday. Médecins Sans Frontières official Lizabeth List described the scene: "I saw one man with a missing leg and a missing arm, a young boy with two missing arms and countless others... We supported a severely malnourished child whose father was dead, the mother very thin; he has two other siblings, and the grandmother with an amputated arm."

The government's safety zones offer no security. Last week, the ICRC reported that at least 20 people had been killed when a zone was shelled. The Associated Press yesterday reported on harrowing video and photographs provided by independent observers who refused to be named for fear of government retaliation. One photograph

taken on January 23 was of family members apparently killed in their sleep by shelling in the town of Undayarkattu—inside a "safety zone". The mother and father lay dead on mats on the floor, still cradling their two children between them.

When asked about the images, spokesman Brigadier Nanayakkara absurdly declared: "No civilians have been killed... There may be civilians injured, not due to shelling. But they may be injured because they have been employed on the construction of [LTTE] defences. Civilians maybe have been injured due to crossfire." He provided no evidence to support these vague allegations.

The ICRC deputy head of operations for South Asia, Monica Zanerelli, described the increasingly desperate conditions in the war zone: "Fighting between government forces and the LTTE continues unabated. The vast majority of civilians are displaced and confined in an area whose size is diminishing day by day. People are moving in search of a less exposed locations and greater safety. According to estimates, only half the population found refuge in the so-called safe area, which is too small for the entire population. Some 10,000-15,000 families, for example, have settled in a coastal area, where there is no clean drinking water."

The Sri Lankan government has repeatedly rejected appeals for a ceasefire, making clear that they intend to destroy the remaining LTTE fighters, regardless of the impact on the civilian population. President Mahinda Rajapakse insists that the renewed civil war is being carried out to "liberate" the country's Tamils from the "terrorist" LTTE. In reality, the government, like its predecessors, is waging a vicious communal war aimed not only at suppressing the democratic rights of the Tamil minority, but of working people as a whole.



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