

HRW report exposes Sri Lankan government's war crimes

Sampath Perera
25 February 2009

A report released last Friday by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has provided a glimpse into the criminal character of the Sri Lankan government's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Entitled "End 'War' on Civilians," it calls on the government to "immediately cease its indiscriminate artillery attacks on civilians in the northern Wanni region and its policy of detaining displaced persons in internment camps".

The HRW is no friend of the LTTE. The report criticises the LTTE's failure to allow civilians to leave its small remaining territory and its shooting at those who try. It also calls on the LTTE to stop placing its fighters near population centres. "With each battlefield defeat, the Tamil Tigers appear to be treating Tamil civilians with increased brutality," James Ross, HRW legal and policy director, said in a press release.

These allegations are routinely made by the Sri Lankan government to justify its war and repeatedly echoed in the local and international media. What the HRW report does, however, is to undermine the government's own lies, which are rarely challenged in the press. The government and the military have denied all responsibility for civilian casualties and where they have been proven, blamed them on the LTTE.

In its press release, the HRW is unequivocal: "The Sri Lankan government has indicated that the ethnic Tamil population trapped in the war zone can be presumed to be siding with the LTTE and treated as combatants, effectively sanctioning unlawful attacks. Sri Lankan forces have repeatedly and indiscriminately shelled areas crowded with displaced persons. This includes numerous reported bombardments of government-declared 'safe zones' and of the remaining hospitals in the region."

According to the report, at least 2,000 civilians have been killed and another 5,000 wounded in the period since December 10. In response to growing international criticism, the government declared a safe area inside LTTE territory. Air force planes dropped leaflets appealing to civilians to move to

this 35-square kilometre area. But as the report documents, the safe zones have been subjected to repeated artillery shelling by the Sri Lankan army.

A relief agency worker told the HRW of the text messages she had received from colleagues inside the zone. "From the evening of January 22 there was non-stop shelling until January 29. Our colleagues sent SMS-messages saying that they were seeing eight to 22 people killed every day. That was only what they saw," she said.

An eyewitness described the aftermath of one attack: "A woman was lying on her back with two infants, one of which apparently survived. A baby was hanging in the tree under which the family had sheltered. Another baby, decapitated, had been flung into the wire fence surrounding the playground. Lying face down next to the woman was her husband." Other eyewitness accounts confirm that the shelling came from army positions.

The government and military maintain a complete media blackout on any independent first-hand reporting on the war. Journalists and human rights groups are barred from the war zone and surrounding areas. The HRW compiled its information covertly over a two-week period in northern Sri Lanka. Its reporters interviewed members of local and international aid organisations, including UN agencies, medical personnel and civilians.

HRW was able to collect a list of patients received between January 1 and January 26 at the makeshift Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital inside LTTE-held territory. Over that period, 573 patients were admitted with "conflict injuries" and 75 of those died. The list provides one indication of the scale of civilian casualties in the current fighting.

Hospitals have also been shelled. The report lists 20 incidents in which hospitals came under attack from 15 December to 10 February. The shelling of the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital finally forced its transfer to a school and community centre in the coastal village of Putumattalan. The International

Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has reported that this facility has also repeatedly come under artillery attack.

T. Satyamurthy, a doctor working at Putumattalan, provided a detailed account to HRW: "[O]n Friday [February 13], nearly 100 civilians were admitted for injuries; on Thursday [February 12] 87 [were] admitted. They have injuries from shells, burn marks, but we don't have basic medicine to treat them," he said.

The military has largely prevented relief supplies entering LTTE-held territory despite the fact that for weeks tens of thousands of refugees have been struggling to survive without adequate food, shelter, clothing and medical supplies. According to one aid agency, "One of the main reasons for the difficulty in organising convoys in and out of the Wanni was that the SLA [Sri Lankan army] and the LTTE were unable to agree on the route to be used."

The HRW recorded the accounts of eyewitnesses who described how the army had used food convoys to advance on LTTE positions. As a result, a convoy was fired on and delayed. The following day, a driver was injured in crossfire.

The report also focussed on the fate of civilians who, after fleeing LTTE territory, are incarcerated in "welfare camps" by the Sri Lankan security forces. HRW spokesman Ross explained: "All civilians who manage to escape the Tamil Tigers are held by the government in squalid government-controlled camps and hospitals with little access to the outside world. The government seems to be trying its best to keep its role in their ordeal away from public scrutiny."

The report detailed the screening process and warned of "fears of possible enforced disappearances and extra judicial killings," since the arbitrary detention of LTTE suspects is frequent. The screening involved three stages. "Very little information is available regarding the first two stages of screening and it is not possible to verify whether and to what extent detentions occur in these locations."

At Omanthai, the last checkpoint before refugees are dispatched to detention camps in Vavuniya, many men and women aged between 18-35 years, as well as several teenage children, have been detained by the security forces. The only observer allowed at the checkpoint, an ICRC official, was told to leave on February 7. The HRW explained that attempts by UN agencies to obtain lists of detainees and their whereabouts from Sri Lankan authorities had so far proved futile.

The situation at Vavuniya hospital was appalling. Several sources reported: "Patients were being discharged—and sent straight to the camps—long before their injuries were healed." In one case, a woman had been injured by shelling, had one of her

feet amputated and had given birth by Caesarean section. She was discharged four days later.

The HRW press release explained: "The hospital in Vavuniya mirrors the town's internment centres. When Human Rights Watch visited, it lacked even the most basic necessities: many of the hospital beds had no sheets, blankets, or pillows. Despite the obvious lack of capacity to attend to the needs of the wounded, the hospital personnel reportedly were instructed by the authorities not to ask for any assistance from the international agencies, and very few agencies were allowed access. Relatives have had difficulty seeing patients, and some have later been visited by the security forces.

"The hospital is essentially run by the military and guarded even more closely than the camps. Uniformed servicemen patrol every ward of the hospital, the corridors, and the hospital yard." An aid agency worker told HRW that he was aware of three incidents in which the relatives of patients "had gone missing" after visiting the hospital.

The government detains all refugees in the so-called welfare camps without exception. Several sources reported on the "presence of plainclothes military intelligence and paramilitaries" in these detention camps. Local staff members have recognised members of the Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE)—a Tamil paramilitary that operates closely with the military and is notorious for human rights abuses.

The response of the Sri Lankan government and media to the HRW report has been predictable. Government spokesmen and newspaper commentators accused the human rights body of having "tarnished the image of the government." In fact, the report confirms what has been evident for many months—that President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government are waging a vicious communal war against the country's Tamil minority and are guilty of war crimes.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact