

Human tragedy continues in northern Sri Lanka

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As fighting between the Sri Lankan army and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continues in the northern Wanni region, the plight of civilians trapped in the war zone is worsening.

Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara claimed yesterday that security forces had surrounded the town of Puthukkudiyiruppu over the weekend and confined the LTTE to just 73 square kilometres of jungle. There is no means of verifying these claims as the government and army block independent media access to the area.

Following international protests against the war, the government has been seeking to downplay the humanitarian crisis. It now insists that only 70,000 people are still in the war zone, not the 250,000 estimated by various international aid agencies. Government spokesmen continue to blame the hundreds of casualties on the LTTE for using civilians as "human shields," rather than on the military's indiscriminate use of artillery and aerial bombardment.

In comments reported by the Associated Press on February 13, disaster management and human rights minister Mahinda Samarasinghe tacitly admitted that the army regards Tamil civilians in the area as the enemy. "How do you identify a civilian and a terrorist?" he exclaimed at a press conference. According to Samarasinghe, all dead civilians are simply LTTE fighters out of uniform.

In bid to black-out unfavourable reports, the government has ordered all humanitarian agencies, except the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), out of the area. In the past few days, officials from the UN Human Rights Council left. Any media reports that provide a glimpse of the unfolding humanitarian crisis are immediately denounced by government spokesmen as helping the LTTE "terrorists".

Despite the media blackout, it is clear that the government's communal war has created a catastrophe. The ICRC has carried out four evacuations from an ad-hoc hospital in the coastal village of Putumattalan. So far, 1,477 injured and their relatives have been transferred to hospital in Trincomalee and many more are waiting. On Friday, 397 patients were evacuated.

The number of evacuees provides an indication of the extent of the devastation being created by the fighting. The makeshift medical facility was set up at Putumattalan after a hospital in Puthukkudiyiruppu came under repeated artillery fire. ICRC and UNCHR statements confirmed the attacks. While the military denied firing at the hospital, its spokesmen refused to guarantee the safety of patients and staff.

In a statement on February 18, ICRC spokesman Paul Castella described the desperate situation in Putumattalan: "We did save lives today [with the ferry] but many people remain behind, helpless and anxiously waiting to be evacuated. It is now a matter of life and death." ICRC spokeswoman Sarasi Wijeratne told the IRIN newsagency: "More and more people are coming to Putumattalan. There is a makeshift medical and triage facility there and we will keep arranging regular ferries to move the sick and wounded out."

Regional Health Director Dr. Thurairajah Varatharajah, who is working at the Putumattalan hospital, told the Associated Press on February 13 that around 40 civilians were being killed and more than 100 injured each day from intense shelling.

Most injuries were due to shrapnel but patients were also suffering from lung infections, fever and coughs, probably from inhaling fumes and smoke. Only eight doctors remain in the area but most staff have stopped coming to work due to the dangers. Varatharajah said the hospital was running

out of essential antibiotics, including penicillin.

The government has severely restricted all supplies, including essentials such as food and medicine, entering the remaining LTTE-held territory. A load of 30 metric tonnes was sent on February 18, including 20 tonnes of flour, 6 of lentils and 4 of sugar—the first since January 29. Essential Services Commissioner General S.B. Divaratne justified the lack of supplies by saying there was no guarantee they would not fall into the LTTE's hands.

As in previous fighting over the past 30 months of renewed war, the strategy of the government and the army has been to use overwhelming superiority in numbers and firepower to wear down the LTTE and terrorise the population. Having confined the LTTE to a small pocket of land, the military wants to force civilians out so that it can turn the entire area into a free fire zone.

The military stopped releasing details of its own casualties last October, fearing that the rising death toll would inflame public opposition. Most soldiers are economic conscripts from poor rural villages where there are no jobs or other opportunities. While no casualty figures have been released, the government defence spokesman has acknowledged that 3,000 soldiers have been killed in the recent months of fighting. In rural areas, white flags and death notices for soldiers have become a common sight.

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In the midst of international condemnation of the humanitarian crisis, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse invited UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to visit the country. Ban declined the invitation but sent the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes in his place last week.

After meeting Rajapakse and visiting Vavuniya in northern Sri Lanka, Holmes offered what could only be described as a whitewash of the government and its war. "It is hard to say how many of those killed are civilians and who is responsible for any particular incident," he declared. After calling on both the LTTE and the government to protect civilians, Holmes focussed on the LTTE, demanding it release civilians from areas under its control.

Amid criticism of its detention of civilians fleeing the fighting, Holmes praised the government for treating Tamil refugees "excellently". The government is currently proposing the establishment of huge "welfare villages" to

compulsorily detain as many as 200,000 war refugees for up to three years and is seeking international money and support.

Last week, LTTE spokesman B. Nadesan expressed his surprise that the UN was not helping civilians. The LTTE, he said, was "deeply sad and puzzled" that the "United Nations [was] not taking effective measures to protect" the Tamil masses. His puzzled disbelief is simply one more futile appeal to the "international community" that has thrown its support behind the Rajapakse government's renewed war over the past three years.

Desperate to boost morale, the LTTE sent two light aircraft on a suicidal mission to attack the capital last Friday. One plane crashed into the Inland Revenue Department building in Colombo and the other was shot down near Sri Lanka's international airport at Katunayake. Such attacks, which will not alter the course of the war, highlight the dead-end of the LTTE's perspective—an armed struggle to pressure the imperialist powers to support a separate Tamil state.

The Rajapakse government's cynical indifference toward the plight of Tamil refugees trapped in the fighting is a warning to working people throughout the island. The military defeat of the LTTE will not bring democracy and prosperity, but will strengthen the position of Rajapakse's right-wing ruling clique amid the country's deepening economic crisis. An end to the fighting will only bring an intensification of class struggles, in which the police-state measures used against the Tamil minority will be extended to the working class as a whole.



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