

Civilian deaths mount amid intense Sri Lankan army shelling

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The UN and international aid agencies have issued renewed warnings that the Sri Lankan army's offensive against the last pocket of territory held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the island's northern Wanni area is producing heavy civilian casualties and a humanitarian catastrophe.

Army shelling killed scores of civilians on Wednesday and Thursday and hunger is growing in the war zone because the government has virtually halted food supplies. The threat of disease epidemics is also growing, and medical facilities have been destroyed by artillery fire.

Thurairajah Varatharajah, a government medical doctor working at the makeshift hospital at Putumattalan, told the Associated Press that the area was being shelled "day and night," both outside and inside the "no fire zone" that the government had promised not to attack. He said the shelling killed 60 civilians on Wednesday and injured 159 others. On Thursday, five bodies were taken to hospital along with 94 injured.

Varatharajah said the civilian population had no clean water supply or sanitation facilities and is facing outbreaks of diarrhea, chicken pox and hepatitis. A shortage of food meant that some have begun eating inedible leaves from trees and that 13 people—most of them elderly—died from starvation in the past week, he said.

Civilians inside the war zone said they were forced to scrounge for food after the relentless shelling on Wednesday and Thursday. "It's been four days since my family has eaten," Mary Jacinta Balachandran, 46, told the Associated Press by telephone as she waited at a makeshift clinic. She said her brother-in-law needed an urgent operation on a stomach wound inflicted by shelling early Thursday. "But the doctors can't take him for surgery because they don't have the right drugs," she said.

Jacques de Maio, South Asian chief of operations for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) told the UN's IRIN news service this week: "Concerning the civilian population trapped by the continuing fighting in the Wanni region, it is definitely one of the most disastrous situations I have come across. They are exposed to shelling and exchanges of gunfire. People are dying. There is no functioning hospital or other medical facility in the area."

A local ICRC staff member, Vadivel Vijayakumar, died in a makeshift hospital on Wednesday after being hit by artillery shrapnel. His nine-year-old son sustained injuries as well. Vijayakumar had been helping to evacuate sick and wounded civilians and their dependents by ICRC-escorted ships to Trincomalee Hospital in the country's east.

On Wednesday, the ICRC organised its eighth evacuation to Trincomalee. Many of the civilians were suffering from shrapnel wounds, confirming that they were victims of shell attacks. Since its first evacuation on February 6, the ICRC has rescued more than 2,700 sick and wounded people, ICRC spokeswoman Wijeratne told the media.

Gordon Wiess, the spokesman for the UN's operations in Sri Lanka, warned on Wednesday of "civilians trapped in a tiny enclave between a lagoon and the eastern sea front, desperate for food, shelter and drinking water." He said it was "unacceptable" that civilians were cut off from aid. Wiess noted: "We have not had any consistent food deliveries since December last year". Instead, "only sporadic deliveries of food supplies" had arrived.

Morven Murchison, an ICRC health coordinator, described the situation in the war zone in an IRIN interview on February 26. Because there was not enough drinking water in the military-demarcated "no fire zone" in the coastal Putumattalan area, displaced people were moving back inland in search of water where fighting was taking place.

Murchison said the risk of disease was very high because

there were no latrines or pits or other forms of sanitation for the war refugees. "There are reports of an increase in the number of cases of communicable diseases, including diarrhoea and respiratory infections. We are very concerned about the possibility of a serious outbreak of disease."

Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara denied that the army was responsible for any artillery attacks in the "no fire zone", claiming: "We don't even use shells now. It's all house-to-house fighting, street-to-street. Hardly any artillery is being used."

But the military spokesman could not, as previously, blame the LTTE for the shelling casualties. The army claimed early this week that it had effectively silenced all the "conventional confrontational capability" of the LTTE. The defence ministry announced on Monday that army divisions had captured Puthukkudiyiruppu town and that the LTTE had been confined to a 47-square kilometre area.

There is no independent reporting on the ground, only defence ministry statements or occasional show trips for selected journalists. Military-linked death squads have silenced even mild critics of the war in the media through assassinations, abductions, death threats and attacks on media organisations.

In an attempt to deflect international criticism, the Sri Lankan government announced on Friday that it would open two "escape routes" for trapped civilians. The decision was reportedly taken at a national security council meeting chaired by President Mahinda Rajapakse. Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona emphasised that opening the routes did not mean any ceasefire with the LTTE.

In a breathtaking display of hypocrisy, Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe is currently in Geneva attending the UN Human Rights Council. He claimed that the government was not violating human rights, but trying to "liberate Tamils" from the clutches of the LTTE.

The government is claiming that only 70,000 civilians remain trapped in the shrinking area under LTTE control. However, the ICRC estimates the numbers at 150,000-200,000. About 37,000 civilians who have fled the area are being forcibly detained in huge camps set up by the military in Vavuniya.

For its part, the LTTE has refused to assist ICRC-led evacuations of civilians. An LTTE spokesman, identified as Thileepan, told Australia's Special Broadcasting Service radio that civilians wanted to stay, despite the appalling

conditions. "These people belong to this land, so why would they need to leave these areas?" he said. "Mass evacuation is not required at all."

There is no doubt that the Rajapakse regime bears the primary responsibility for the humanitarian disaster. The Sri Lankan military is intent on driving all civilians out of the area, and into prison camps, in order to create a free-fire zone to annihilate the remaining LTTE forces. Tamil refugees legitimately fear reprisals, persecution and incarceration by government forces.

But according to on-the-spot reports, including from international aid agencies, the LTTE is trying to stop civilians fleeing the war zone. Its perspective is to use the trapped civilians as pawns as it appeals to the international powers to place pressure on the Sri Lankan government for a ceasefire. The LTTE still hopes to secure a settlement brokered by the Western powers that will allow for an LTTE-run autonomous zone, and is quite prepared to sacrifice civilian lives to achieve its objectives.

However, the LTTE's perspective of relying on the major powers, such as India, the US, EU and Japan, to intervene is also in tatters. All these governments have backed Rajapakse's war in the hope of ending a destabilising conflict that affects their interests across South Asia.

Last week, the Obama administration lined up openly behind the Sri Lankan regime, blaming the LTTE for the "increasing sufferings" of civilians in the war area. US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher echoed the Sri Lankan military's propaganda, calling on the LTTE to allow civilians to flee, and to stop lobbying shells and shooting guns out of the safe zone declared by the government.



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