

Mounting civilian death toll in Sri Lankan war

Our reporter
25 April 2009

Despite the Sri Lankan government's ban on any independent reporting from the island's war zone, further evidence has emerged of the scale of the army's crimes as it seeks to destroy the remaining pockets of resistance by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

A UN report leaked to the media yesterday put the number of civilian deaths over the past three months at 6,432, many of them children, and 13,946 wounded. The death toll has escalated dramatically from an average of 33 killed a day at the end of January to 116 a day in April.

More than 5,500 deaths have occurred inside the government's self-declared "no fire" zone, where civilians are supposed to be safe. The UN estimates that between 50,000 and 100,000 people are still trapped in a narrow strip of coastline, following the fleeing of up to 100,000 from the area this week when the army breached the LTTE's defences.

The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has played down the number of civilians caught in the fighting and blamed all casualties on the LTTE, claiming they were using civilians as "human shields". While aid agencies have reported cases of the LTTE preventing civilians from fleeing, full responsibility for the human tragedy in northern Sri Lanka rests with the Rajapakse government and the military, which has indiscriminately shelled the no-fire zone and blocked the entry of aid supplies.

Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona yesterday denied there was any humanitarian crisis. "We have a

challenge and we have experience and we will deal with it more than adequately," he said. Just as the Sri Lankan officials have borrowed their terminology from the US "war on terrorism" to describe their communal war, so they are using the technique of the big lie to answer mounting evidence of their crimes.

The latest UN figures are already out of date. Since the Sri Lankan army launched its final assault this week, civilian casualties have sharply increased. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) spokeswoman Sarasi Wijeratne told the media yesterday: "Hundreds more civilians have been killed or wounded in recent days."

Describing the situation in the no-fire zone, Wijeratne said: "The humanitarian conditions in the conflict area are very grim. There's a lack of medical staff, supplies and drinking water. The people who remain are completely reliant on humanitarian aid and as far as we are aware no food has gone in there since the first week of April."

Those who fled this week have begun to describe the conditions they faced to aid workers, medical staff and the media. ICRC doctor E.G. Gnanakunalan, based at a field hospital in Pulmoddai, said that most of the displaced were extremely traumatised. "They are mentally and physically tortured," he said. "One lady came and she had been eating with her husband and children. A shell fell on the house and her husband and some of the children died and she lost both her legs."

Paul McMaster, a surgeon working with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) at the Vavuniya hospital, said that about three quarters of the wounded were suffering

blast injuries, and the rest gunshot wounds and injuries caused by mine explosions. “We are doing a lot of amputations. Many of the lower limbs are severely, severely injured and blown off... We had a young woman of about 19 who is breast feeding that I had to do a major leg amputation. I just wonder what the future for her life and child will be.”

MSF coordinator Lisabeth List said that the 600-capacity hospital had been overwhelmed with close to 2,000 patients. “You might have two people in a bed and one lying under the bed and one on each side,” she told Reuters. “They are lying in the corridors and outside on the walkways.” List explained that many of the people from the battle zone were also suffering hunger and dehydration.

Most of the refugees—now estimated to number up to 200,000—are being herded into crowded detention centres surrounded by soldiers. UN spokesman Gordon Weiss described the camps as “overcrowded, lacking proper shelter and without enough resources to sustain humane conditions”.

Speaking to the BBC, UN humanitarian coordinator Neil Buhne described conditions in the camps near Vavuniya. “I saw infants with dysentery, malnourished children and women, untended wounds, and people dressed in the ragged clothing they’ve been wearing for months.”

The scale of the humanitarian disaster underscores the utter hypocrisy of the response by the major powers, which have all backed Rajapakse’s criminal war over the past three years. Gathered in the UN Security Council on Thursday, they made no condemnation of the Sri Lankan government’s actions, seizing instead on the disaster to demand that the LTTE surrender.

UN Security Council president, Mexico’s ambassador Claude Heller, told the media: “We demand that the LTTE immediately lay down arms, renounce terrorism, allow UN assisted evacuation of the remaining civilians in the conflict area and join the political process.” The Sri Lankan government has already ruled out any amnesty for the LTTE leadership or any place for it in the political process.

The US, France and Britain have chimed in with predictable expressions of concern. On Wednesday, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner suggested a possible joint intervention with Britain to rescue the Tamil civilians. For its part, China has helped protect the Rajapakse government by blocking any formal UN Security Council resolution—something none of the other permanent members has challenged.

The various manoeuvres within the UN are not motivated by any genuine concern for the plight of the hundreds of thousands of desperate people. Rather, each of the major powers is seeking to exploit the tragedy to protect and advance its own economic and strategic interests in the region. Their overriding fear is that a humanitarian catastrophe will destabilise Sri Lanka and the neighbouring region, especially India, for many years to come.

The Indian government’s public expressions of consternation at the situation are aimed at quelling mounting anger in Tamil Nadu—especially since the country’s national elections are now underway. Two top Indian bureaucrats—Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and National Security Advisor, M.K. Narayanan—were dispatched to Colombo yesterday to voice New Delhi’s concerns to the Rajapakse government.

Having already ruled out any ceasefire, the Sri Lankan government rejected a proposal by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on Thursday to send a UN humanitarian team to the war zone to assess the extent of the crisis. The response simply underscores President Rajapakse determination to crush the LTTE, whatever the human cost, and to cover up as far as possible his government’s war crimes.



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