

New evidence of Sri Lankan army atrocities

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Despite the government's denials, the Sri Lankan army offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is continuing with criminal indifference to the toll on the estimated 50,000 civilians trapped in the fighting.

The military continued to shell the government-proclaimed no-fire zone—the small pocket of territory still held by the LTTE—on Friday and Saturday, hitting a makeshift hospital at Mullivaikkal. Thurairajah Varatharajah, a government doctor working at the hospital, told Al Jazeera by telephone on Saturday that more than 60 people had been killed and another 87 injured.

“Yesterday there [were] shell attacks on the hospital ... and today, morning there [were] two attacks, mainly in front of the hospital and other places as well. Today, shells fell [on two occasions on] the hospital area, totalling 60 to 70 persons dead. 87 persons got [injured],” Varatharajah said.

In a separate interview with the *Independent*, the doctor explained that the hospital was located about one kilometre from the frontlines and he was in no doubt that the shelling came from government troops. A BBC article based on contact with two government doctors put the death toll higher at 91 and published photos of the damage.

Government and military officials flatly denied the claims. Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara dismissed all reports as the “exaggerated stories” of LTTE supporters. “There is no shelling taking place; we have never shelled this place and it happened in an area where the LTTE [are in control].”

The denial cannot be believed. Last month, under mounting international pressure, the Sri Lankan government announced that it would halt the use of all heavy weapons in its operations to seize the no-fire zone. It proclaimed the no-fire zone on February 12 and had previously denied bombarding it with artillery or from the air.

Last Friday, however, an internal UN report was leaked to the media containing satellite photographs showing bomb or artillery craters in the no-fire zone. “Within the northern and southern sections of the civilian safe zone, there are new indications of building destruction and damage resulting from shelling and possible air strikes,” it stated. The photographs were taken between February 15 and April 19.

Foreign secretary Palitha Kohona initially admitted that the military had shelled the area, but claimed that civilians had not been harmed. “As long as the retaliation [to the LTTE] is proportionate, it is perfectly legitimate and what we did exactly was locate these guns and retaliate against those guns,” he said.

Even this admission was quickly reversed. A defence ministry statement issued after Kohona's comments declared: “Conclusions drawn from the interpretations of these images have no scientific validity.” Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella claimed the images could have been a LTTE “ploy”. However, Einer Bjorge, head of the Unosat mapping unit, insisted that the images were “fairly clear”.

The Sri Lankan military is continuing its offensive to seize the no-fire zone. Brigadier Nanayakkara told the media on Sunday that the army had captured another earthen defensive structure, 500 metres long, that was blocking the A-35 road to Mullaithivu. Four military brigades were engaging in the fighting.

Nanayakkara claimed that many LTTE fighters were killed in the battle but gave no figures for the army's casualties. Since last October, the government has refused to release details of military casualties for unstated “security reasons”. In reality, the government and the military are concerned that public anger will erupt over the mounting death toll of soldiers recruited from among impoverished rural youth.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) deputy head of operations for South Asia, Monica Zanarelli, appealed last week for greater care for the trapped Tamil civilians in the no-fire zone. “Given the catastrophic situation of thousands of displaced, sick and wounded people still in the conflict area, the parties must do more to protect them and must allow more food and medicine into the area,” she said.

The military has not allowed adequate supplies of food, water and medicine into the no-fire zone. Many civilians who managed to flee have been injured, emaciated and dehydrated. They have been herded into military-controlled camps and treated as prisoners of war. No one has been allowed to leave and visitors have been barred.

Zanarelli insisted: “It is the responsibility of the authorities to ensure that all displaced people are safe and have access to food, medical care, clean water and sanitation.... The ICRC has asked

the authorities to clarify the time frame for lifting restrictions on movement imposed on the displaced population and to indicate when the resettlement process will begin.”

Gordon Weiss, UN spokesman for Sri Lanka, told the media: “The population that emerged in the last 10 days was emaciated, worn down, bearing large numbers of war injured. Medical facilities in the area are still struggling to cope with the sheer number of people who have emerged.”

The number of civilians detained since January has risen to 188,022. Most are living in 32 camps in the town of Vavuniya, while others are in the Jaffna peninsula and in the eastern town of Trincomalee. Hospitals are overwhelmed with the injured and sick; many have yet to get treatment.

Camps are surrounded with razor wire and guarded by the military. Last week the government appointed former Jaffna military commander and chief-of-staff, Major General G.A. Chandrasiri to supervise the detention centres.

The defence ministry last Thursday further tightened access to the camps, declaring that “external persons” entering the camps were “causing difficulty” for the security forces. All groups and individuals are now banned from Vavuniya without prior defence ministry permission.

The announcement is another attempt by the government and the military to stifle any independent reporting of the appalling conditions facing Tamil refugees and the crimes of the Sri Lankan military. An official media blackout already applies to the northern war zone.

The Sri Lankan government is under pressure from the major powers to halt the fighting in the north. Last week British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner visited Sri Lanka as envoys of the European Union to demand a temporary ceasefire. The government rejected the appeal and refused to allow the envoys to visit the front lines.

The LTTE made another desperate plea yesterday to Miliband and Kouchner to pressure the Sri Lankan government for a truce. Both foreign ministers have repeatedly declared their hostility to the LTTE and recently backed a UN Security Council statement calling for the LTTE to surrender unconditionally. The LTTE’s futile appeal is a continuation of its bankrupt perspective of a separate capitalist state—a program that always depended on the backing of one or more of the major powers.

Explaining the purpose of last week’s visit, Miliband told the BBC last week: “This is a civil war that does have regional and wider ramifications and, obviously, a massive civilian emergency as well.” The reference to “regional ramifications” underscores the fact that the main concern of Britain and France, as well as the US, is not the plight of civilians, but the destabilising impact of the war, particularly in Tamil Nadu in southern India, and its

implications for their strategic and economic interests.

The US in particular is concerned about growing influence of China, which has backed the Colombo government’s war and has provided aid and investment to Sri Lanka. The US considers China to be a potential strategic rival in Asia and internationally.

Responding to the visit of Miliband and Kouchner, President Rajapakse last Thursday declared: “The government is not ready to enter into any kind of cease-fire with the terrorists. It is my duty to protect the people of this country. I don’t need lectures from Western representatives... We have seen how Afghanistan is bombed. It must be made clear that before accusing others, you must have the strength to know what you do yourself.”

Far from opposing the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, successive Colombo governments, including that of Rajapakse, have supported these neo-colonial operations. Rajapakse is demanding unconditional imperialist backing for his own “war on terrorism” and all the crimes being carried out by the Sri Lankan military.

Rajapakse’s warmongering contains a sharp warning for the working class. Facing a deepening economic crisis compounded by massive war expenditures and global recession, the government will not tolerate any opposition from working people seeking to defend their living and social conditions.



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