

New evidence of Sri Lankan army war crimes

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The visit by UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon to Sri Lanka last weekend provided a glimpse into the terrible conditions facing Tamil civilians who fled recent fighting between the army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Ban visited the huge Manik Farm detention centre housing an estimated 160,000 war refugees and flew by helicopter over the area where the final battles took place last week.

Journalists accompanying Ban in the helicopter published photos and footage showing scenes of utter devastation. Tens of thousands of civilians were trapped in the area for weeks as the Sri Lankan army sought to destroy the remnants of the LTTE. The images—the first by independent reporters—are evidence of the military’s indiscriminate bombardment of the civilian areas, which constitute war crimes under international law.

Describing what he saw, the *Times* reporter wrote: “From the air, the battle zone reveals itself one clue at a time—the scorched patches of earth, the blasted palm trees, the burnt-out skeletal houses. Sri Lanka’s no-fire zone is a scene of such utter devastation it mocks its very name. It is a glimpse of hell unleashed in paradise.

“A glistening white beach packed with home-made bunkers where civilians huddled to protect themselves from the shells that the government denies launching in the final weeks of the offensive. The craters in the white sand; the charcoal coloured scorch marks and bombed-out dwellings; the abandoned bus, its forlorn white flag still flying, and the human detritus tell a very different story.”

Speaking to CNN, Ban said: “I have seen complete devastation here, and there must have been in the crossfire many civilian casualties.” He added: “I have travelled around the world and visited similar places, but this is by far the most appalling scenes I have seen. I sympathise fully with all of the displaced persons.”

The photographic evidence from the war zone makes a mockery of Sri Lankan government claims that the army was conducting a “humanitarian operation” to “liberate” the civilians from the LTTE and had ended its use of heavy

weapons. In his “victory speech” in parliament last Tuesday, President Mahinda Rajapakse lyingly declared that the military had not killed a single civilian in its war against the LTTE.

A leaked UN report estimated that 7,000 civilians were killed and nearly 17,000 injured in the period from January 20 to May 7. Hundreds more died in the final days of the war as the army completed its slaughter of the remaining LTTE fighters with criminal disregard for civilian life. A makeshift hospital inside the government’s “no fire” zone was shelled twice in the last week.

Further evidence of the scale of the army’s atrocities was provided by French-based aid group Handicap International (HI), which told the *Australian* yesterday that up to 30,000 people trapped in the war zone had been left disabled by the loss of limbs or paralysis due to the intense shelling and bombing. HI was preparing prosthetic limbs for the survivors.

Head of HI Lanka, Satish Mishra, said: “The consignment is huge. In total, around 9 percent of people within the IDP [internally displaced persons] camps will require prosthetic or orthotic support such as calipers. It’s an extraordinary figure. If there were 250,000 to 300,000 people there [in the conflict zone] then we’re talking about 25,000 to 30,000 people who require these.”

In another interview, Mishra told the *Telegraph* that HI’s work was being hampered because of the government’s ban on refugees leaving the camps to travel to its factory in Batticaloa. As a result, aid workers were unable properly fit the artificial limbs and train people to use them.

During discussions with Rajapakse, Ban called for “unimpeded access and freedom of movement within the camps” for international aid agencies. However, in a statement on Sunday, the Sri Lankan president rejected the request saying that there were still “LTTE infiltrators” among the refugees. The statement continued: “As conditions improved, especially with regard to security, there would be no objections to such assistance.”

Rajapakse did not explain why the provision of basic necessities to Tamil civilians was a security issue. In reality,

just as it banned reporters and most aid workers from the war zone to cover up its war crimes, the government is barring access to the detention centres to cover up the conditions inside and to prevent refugees from telling their stories.

These “welfare villages” are internment centres for more than a quarter of a million Tamil civilians—men, women and children. Those inside are not treated as refugees but as prisoners. The camps at Manik Farm are surrounded by two-metre fences strung with barbed wire and razor wire. Deep trenches have been dug around the camps, which are guarded by heavily armed soldiers.

Gresen Brando from UN Humanitarian Affairs told the BBC that 74,000 people were living in one camp where space was enough for only half that number. He said that Manik Farm complex was the world’s largest displacement camp.

Ban was given a guided tour complete with a welcoming song by a group of schoolgirls dressed in spotless white uniforms. The reality, however, is completely different. Journalists accompanying Ban managed to speak to some detainees who were reluctant to give their full names for fear of reprisals.

Kumar told the *Times*: “We are in an open jail. Help us, we want to be free... There is not enough food. There is not enough hospital [care] here.” Asked how long he thought he would be in the camp, Kumar responded: “I don’t know. Maybe forever. We are afraid we will be killed. If I tell the truth I will be killed.”

Father Amalraj told the newspaper that he was shocked by what he found when he arrived at the camp last week. “I read in a book on the Second World War about concentration camps. I feel we are experiencing that now. The concentration camps of the Second World War are here in Sri Lanka.”

Following a visit to Colombo last week by Indian officials, the government pledged to resettle the internees within 180 days. Similar pledges were made when the army “liberated” the East of the island from the LTTE. Two years later, tens of thousands of people are still languishing in refugee camps with no prospect of being resettled.

Conditions inside the Manik Farm camps are overcrowded. People complained to journalists about the lack of adequate food, medical attention and sanitary facilities. The BBC reported at one hospital that “malnourished patients [are] lying on cot beds in the open air, drips attached, flies buzzing round their heads. A few looked close to death.”

Hundreds of young men and women have been dragged away by the security forces and associated paramilitaries and

detained in unknown locations for being “LTTE suspects”. A mother told the *Times* that young people had been told by the military that they would be safe if they told the truth. She had not seen her 17-year-old daughter for seven days.

Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara told the *Hindu* on Sunday that 9,100 LTTE cadres had “surrendered” to the military. He said that 7,237 were now being held in “rehabilitation centres”—that is, imprisoned indefinitely without charge or basic democratic rights. Relatives and friends have not been informed of their whereabouts.

In the newly “liberated” North, the government is already preparing for what amounts to the military occupation of a large swathe of land from the north-western Mannar district to north-eastern Mullaithivu.

Army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka told the Colombo-based *Nation* that the army would increase its strength and establish major bases in Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu—formerly the two main LTTE centres. A military spokesman provided further details of plans for two command centres, two air force bases and new police stations. The navy will set up more guard posts along the north-western and north-eastern coast lines.

These preparations underscore the fact that Rajapakse was not conducting a “war on terrorism” but a war against Tamils to establish its writ in the North and East and to foment communal tensions to divide Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers on ethnic lines. The treatment being meted out to hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians is a warning to working people throughout the island that the government will deal no less ruthlessly with anyone who opposes its new “economic war” on the living standards and social position of workers.



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