

War crime in Sri Lanka: Civilians slaughtered by army shelling

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In what constitutes a blatant war crime by the Sri Lankan government, the army's merciless bombardment of a so-called no-fire zone, a small strip of land on the country's northeast coast, killed and wounded thousands of Tamil civilians over the weekend.

According to a government doctor at the Mullaivaikal field hospital in the zone, which is the last territory still controlled by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the number of bodies brought to the facility by 3 p.m. Sunday numbered 378, while 1,122 wounded had arrived seeking medical treatment.

The account was backed up by the United Nations representative in Sri Lanka. "It seems beyond dispute that hundreds of civilians were killed overnight including more than 100 children," said UN spokesman Gordon Weiss. "The UN remains concerned about the use of heavy weapons inside this small pocket of land."

If the number of bodies brought to one hospital approached 400, the total number of dead is far higher. The pro-LTTE web site *tamilnet.com* reported that humanitarian workers in the zone had counted 1,200 bodies Sunday and that as many as 2,000 civilians had been slaughtered by the Sri Lanka army using cluster bombs, multi-barrel rocket launchers and heavy artillery. The site carried photographs of mangled corpses laid out in rows on mats and in the dirt. Many other bodies were reportedly buried by their families after the attack.

In addition to the artillery barrage, Sri Lankan Air Force fighter jets carried out two bombing raids against the zone on Sunday, *tamilnet.com* reported.

Dr. V. Shanmugarajah, the government physician, told the Associated Press that the carnage unleashed by the Sri Lankan army bombardment was the worst he had seen so far in the government offensive and had overwhelmed his hospital.

"We are doing the first aid and some surgeries as

quickly as we can," said the doctor. "We are doing what is possible. The situation is overwhelming; nothing is within our control." Many of the hospital's staff members were unable to come to work because their own houses had been shelled.

The first artillery rounds began falling on the area Saturday night, shortly after a Red Cross ship evacuating wounded civilians had left the area. The barrage continued throughout the night, forcing thousands to huddle for protection in makeshift bunkers, Dr. Shanmugarajah recounted.

The Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has dubbed its military slaughter of Tamil civilians as a "humanitarian operation" and "the world largest hostage rescue mission."

Against all independent accounts and available evidence, the government has claimed that the Tamil Tigers themselves have turned heavy weapons against Tamil civilians in an attempt to discredit the government and win international sympathy.

"This is what the LTTE is doing; they are firing indiscriminately at the civilians and putting the blame on the army," said military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara.

The Defense Ministry, however, acknowledged that the army carried out an offensive on Saturday. "The troops attached to the Air Mobile Brigade further advanced into the 'No Fire Zone' capturing LTTE positions in general area of Karaiyamullivaikal yesterday," the government's web site reported Sunday.

While the government claims that only 10,000 to 20,000 civilians are trapped in the LTTE-held enclave of just a few square kilometers, aid workers and foreign diplomats have put the number as high as 120,000. The UN's official estimate is more than 50,000. In addition to the deadly attacks of the Sri Lankan army, they suffer from insufficient food, potable water and medicine. Most are

living in tents.

The Sri Lankan government has repeatedly claimed that it has halted the use of heavy weapons in its campaign to eradicate the LTTE and seize the last strip of land that it controls. This claim has repeatedly been exposed as a lie, with both the United Nations and Washington accusing the army of carrying out artillery bombardment and air strikes on the area.

The human rights group Human Rights Watch issued a report Saturday documenting repeated shelling of hospitals by the Sri Lankan army.

The report cited “30 attacks on permanent and makeshift hospitals in the combat area since December 2008.” It added, “One of the deadliest took place on May 2, when artillery shells struck Mullaivaikal hospital in the government-declared ‘no-fire zone,’ killing 68 persons and wounding 87.”

Pointing to the deliberate character of these attacks on medical facilities, the report noted that doctors in the area reported GPS coordinates to the Sri Lankan military each time they established a new field hospital so that they would not be attacked. Instead, however, “Medical staff said that, on several occasions, attacks occurred on the day after the coordinates had been transmitted.” Staff members said that hospitals were targeted even though they were clearly marked as medical facilities with large red crosses.

The report pointed out that hospitals are specifically protected under the Geneva Conventions. “Repeated Sri Lankan artillery attacks striking known hospitals is evidence of war crimes,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to conceal its crimes, the Rajapakse government expelled a British television reporting team from the country Sunday. The summary deportation was in retaliation for a segment broadcast May 5 on ITV’s Channel 4 News exposing horrific conditions for more than 100,000 Tamil civilians who have been placed in barbed wire encircled internment camps in the northern town of Vavuniya.

Nick Paton Walsh of Channel 4 reported that the camps have seen “bodies left for days; children crushed in the rush for food; the sexual abuse of women; disappearances.” The televised segment included interviews with aid workers denouncing the conditions.

The Sri Lankan government claimed that the report’s “obvious intention is to discredit the Security Forces and prevent its onward march by hook or by crook.”

The US government has called for an end to attacks on

civilians, while simultaneously condemning the LTTE for using the Tamil population as “human shields.” Last month, the State Department advocated “power sharing arrangements so that lasting peace and reconciliation can be achieved.”

Washington’s expressions of concern, like those of the European Union, are utterly hypocritical. Both branded the LTTE as a “terrorist organization” and have given encouragement and direct aid to Colombo to wage its military offensive in the name of a “war on terrorism.”

The Rajapakse government, which resumed the war beginning in 2006, is determined to pursue its military campaign until it wipes out the LTTE and forces an unconditional surrender, no matter what the cost in terms of civilian casualties.

The real political motives behind the war are those of the Sinhalese ruling elite, which is determined to preserve its power and privileges through the suppression not only of the Tamil minority, but of the Sri Lankan working class as a whole.

The communal conflict erupted 26 years ago as the outcome of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination and was specifically triggered by the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983.

The national separatist program of the LTTE, based on armed struggle and winning the backing of one or another of the major powers for creating an independent capitalist state, served to deepen this conflict.

Behind the push by the US and Europe for a political settlement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites, is their fear that the government’s policy of war until total victory will create political instability that will cut across their own geo-strategic interests, not only in Sri Lanka, but also India, with its large Tamil population.

They are hardly motivated by revulsion over the war crimes being carried out by the Rajapakse government—they are carrying out their own in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.



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