

Army's war crimes continue in northern Sri Lanka

Wije Dias
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The Sri Lankan army was responsible for a further atrocity yesterday as it intensified its offensive against the remnants of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At least 49 people were killed and more than 50 injured when a shell struck the only remaining hospital in the so-called no-fire zone on the north east coast of the island.

The UN estimates that between 50,000 and 100,000 civilians are trapped inside the remaining pocket of LTTE-held territory, without adequate supplies of food and medicine. The hospital is a makeshift facility set up at the Mullaivaikal East primary school and staffed by government doctors, administrators and volunteers.

Dr V. Shanmugarajah said he was in the operating theatre at the time the shell struck, adding that it appeared to have come from the direction of Puthukkuyiruppu, an area held by the army. In a video recording released via the "War without Witness" group, he explained that the hospital had no safe bunker and that patients and their helpers had been sleeping outside, under tarpaulin sheets.

"The artillery hit directly on the hospital and caused this damage. When the shell hit, all the people were running to save their lives... it was chaos... it is difficult for me to ask other staff to stay and work," Shanmugarajah said.

Dr Thurairaja Varatharajah, a senior government official, told the media: "One side of the hospital was destroyed in today's shelling." He said many of the injured had head and stomach wounds, and he expected the death toll to rise. Among the dead were a government-appointed administrator and two volunteer staff.

An unnamed hospital worker said the casualties had included patients, bystanders and staff in the hospital admission ward near a temporary shelter. "Now also heavy shelling is going on in this area and heavy fighting is going

on. Today the situation is worse because all of the patients ran away from the hospital after this incident," he said.

The strike on the hospital followed heavy army barrages on the no-fire zone last week that killed at least 430 people and injured more than 1,000 in what UN spokesman Gordon Weiss described as a "bloodbath". The latest war crime yesterday makes clear that the Sri Lankan government and the military are intent on continuing their offensive regardless of the cost in civilian lives.

Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara flatly denied the latest evidence of the army's atrocities, saying: "We are not using heavy artillery or any heavy weapons." Similarly the Colombo government has dismissed the weekend's massacre as LTTE propaganda and blamed the LTTE for using civilians as "human shields".

While human rights organisations have provided some evidence of the LTTE preventing civilians from leaving its territory, the Sri Lankan government bears full responsible for the atrocities being carried out by the army. The military's statement that it is not using heavy weapons is no more credible than its previous lies.

Yesterday was not the first time that army shelling has hit a hospital. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report released last Friday listed 30 attacks on hospitals within LTTE-held territory since December as "evidence of war crimes". "While doctors and nurses struggle to save lives in overcrowded and underequipped facilities, Sri Lankan army attacks have hit one hospital after another," HRW Asia director Brad Adams said in a press release.

As the Sri Lanka army has advanced, HRW explained, "Hospital staff have increasingly been compelled to leave permanent hospitals to set up makeshift hospitals in LTTE-controlled areas. Several independent sources informed Human Rights Watch that each time a hospital was

established in a new location, the doctors transmitted GPS coordinates of the facility to the Sri Lankan government to ensure that the facility would be protected from military attack. Medical staff said that, on several occasions, attacks occurred on the day after the coordinates had been transmitted.”

An aid worker told HRW about an attack on Valayanmadam hospital in the no-fire zone on April 2: “I was in the hospital. Right after 12.30 p.m., I noticed a Sri Lanka military drone conducting reconnaissance above the hospital. The people in the hospital suspected that an attack was imminent, so they lay down on the ground. Shortly thereafter, we heard a loud explosion in the air, followed by several smaller explosions on the ground... One of the doctors, who was lying just next to me, was killed by a shrapnel piece that hit him in the head. Four or five people were killed and more than 30 were wounded in the attack.”

The army’s attacks on hospitals and other civilian targets are not accidents but part of a strategy of terrorising the population inside the remaining LTTE territory. The aim is to stampede civilians into leaving the area so that it can be turned into a free fire zone. Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara candidly told the press that “if not for the civilians, it would take about 72 hours” to defeat the LTTE.

Since mid-February, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has evacuated nearly 14,000 injured and their carers from the war zone by sea, but its ability to do so has become increasingly precarious. Yesterday the ICRC head in Colombo, Paul Castella, made another urgent appeal for proper access to the no-fire zone, after an ICRC-chartered ferry was compelled to stay offshore for the entire day, then had to turn back as constant fighting made landing too dangerous.

The ferry is a means not only for evacuating the sick and injured, but providing desperately needed food and medical supplies. It last reached the area on May 9, but had been unable to approach the shore on May 8 due to heavy fighting. “The plight of the people remaining in the combat area is desperate,” Castella said. “We need unimpeded access to them in order to save lives.”

World Food Program spokeswoman Emilia Casella expressed concern this week that insufficient food was reaching the no-fire zone. “The humanitarian situation for those trapped inside the conflict zone obviously is desperate and reports are indicating that many of the fleeing IDPs [internally displaced persons] have not had a proper meal in days,” she said. “What we are seeing among newly-arrived

IDPs [is] children under five, pregnant and lactating women and elderly [who] are reportedly significantly under-nourished due to the long distances that they are travelling and the lack of adequate food while in the conflict zone.”

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has rejected all calls for a ceasefire and responded to any criticisms of the military’s actions with unconcealed contempt. Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona lashed out at UN spokesman Gordon Weiss’s description of last weekend’s shelling as a “bloodbath”, declaring: “It is not the role of the UN to issue such statements embarrassing the respective governments and in this Mr Gordon released to the media what he got without considering the damage to the Sri Lankan government.”

The Rajapakse government, however, is secure in the knowledge that no action will be taken through the UN. China, Russia, Japan and Vietnam tacitly supported the Sri Lankan government and its war crimes by blocking any formal discussion of the situation in the UN Security Council on Monday. The US, France and Britain have been issuing hypocritical expressions of concern about the humanitarian crisis, but all these powers quietly backed Rajapakse’s decision to plunge the country back to war in mid-2006. Their calls for a ceasefire are not issued out of concern for the trapped civilians, but to shape the outcome of the war in their own economic and strategic interests.

All these powers bear their share of political responsibility for the Sri Lankan government’s communal war and the war crimes being carried out.



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