

Sri Lankan military again shells hospital in no-fire zone

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In another cold-blooded war crime, the Sri Lankan military shelled the only remaining hospital in the “no-fire zone” on the north-eastern coast on Wednesday, killing dozens of people. A government doctor told Agence France Presse that three shells hit the makeshift hospital. The attack was the second on the hospital in two days.

Dr V. Shanmugarajah told the Associated Press by telephone it was the third time that the hospital had come under fire this month. One shell landed in an administration office of the hospital, while another hit a ward filled with patients.

Dr Thurairaja Varatharajah said the latest attack had killed at least 50 people, including patients, relatives and a health aide, and wounded another 60. He said shelling had continued throughout the day. On Tuesday, at least 49 people were killed by army shelling of the same facility.

“We are unable to treat the people properly because a lot of the aides have fled the hospital. We have to go into bunkers when there is shelling and try to treat them as much as we can when there is a lull,” Varatharajah said.

A third unnamed health official told the Associated Press on Thursday that though the number of wounded was increasing, the hospital had virtually been abandoned because it was too dangerous to work there. About 400 badly wounded patients remained inside, in desperate need of medical attention, along with 100 bodies waiting to be buried.

Tamilnet, which supports the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), put the number of casualties from Wednesday’s shelling at 100 dead, including children, patients and a doctor. A medical staff member told the web site: “Looking at the hospital and hearing the civilians cry, you feel only disaster.”

Responsibility for this disaster rests squarely with the Sri Lankan government and military high command, which have rejected all appeals for an end to fighting and pursued the

offensive with criminal indifference to the toll of civilian life.

President Mahinda Rajapakse and his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, told the Indian media on Monday that the LTTE would be crushed within the next 48 hours. The remaining patch of LTTE-held territory is no more than a few square kilometres in size and, according to UN estimates, contains around 50,000 civilians.

The government had proclaimed the entire area as a no-fire zone in February, but redemarcated the area as the army renewed its offensive this week against the remaining LTTE fighters—estimated at between 200 and 500. The army has shelled the makeshift hospital in the Mullaivaikal East primary school despite the fact that it is within the government’s revised no-fire zone.

Conditions inside the zone are horrific. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported yesterday that its supply vessels have been unable to land limited aid since May 9. “As fighting goes on unabated, civilians are forced to seek protection in hand-dug bunkers, making it even more difficult to fetch scarce drinking water and food,” a statement explained. ICRC director of operations Pierre Krähenbühl said: “Our staff are witnessing an unimaginable humanitarian catastrophe.”

The Sri Lankan government and military have responded to growing evidence of their war crimes with a series of lies. Their spokesmen continue to insist that the army is not using heavy weapons in their assault, that the troops are engaged in a “rescue operation” and that the LTTE is to blame for using the civilians as “human shields”. The military boasted that 1,500 civilians had been able to flee the no-fire zone on Thursday.

There is certainly mounting evidence that the remaining LTTE fighters have forcibly tried to prevent civilians from fleeing. The LTTE’s use of Tamil civilians as pawns in their futile efforts to pressure the major powers for a ceasefire flows from its separatist program and perspective, which always represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the Tamil masses.

However, the LTTE's actions in no way justify the army's deliberate attacks on civilian targets, which is a war crime under international law. The shelling of the remaining hospital is part of a strategy that the military has employed repeatedly over the past three years of fighting. Artillery shelling and aerial bombardment are used to terrorise the civilian population and create a stampede, opening the way for an all-out offensive on LTTE forces.

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) released another report on Tuesday based on new satellite imagery and eyewitness accounts that again expose government claims not to be using heavy weapons in the no-fire zone. Local HRW sources reported that more than 400 civilians have been killed and over 1,000 wounded since May 9.

HRW Asia director Brad Adams said: "Recent satellite photos and witness accounts show the brutal shelling of civilians in the conflict area goes on. Neither the Sri Lankan army nor the Tamil Tigers appear to have any reluctance in using civilians as cannon fodder."

One victim, 35, told HRW she spent days in shallow bunkers to escape from government artillery and was prevented by the LTTE from escaping. She narrowly escaped death on May 9, when a shell struck near a bunker in which she and 15 others were sheltering. The tractor that had just been used to excavate the bunker was destroyed. "If it hadn't been for the tractor, we would have all been dead," she said.

Another civilian said he was with his family in a dug-out-trench without any cover for several days. They were attacked from all sides and "only left the bunker to get food and water for our three children". On May 9, a shell killed his 15-year-old nephew and wounded his nephew's older brother and sister. He thought the army was attacking the LTTE fighters in the nearby jungles.

The same man accused the LTTE of atrocities. As several hundred tried to flee the no-fire zone in early April, he said, "They [the LTTE] just opened fire on the first row of people. I don't know whether they lived or died, however. We fell to the ground as soon as the firing started. When it stopped, we ran back as quickly as we could. There were children among the people who got shot as well."

After weeks of atrocities in northern Sri Lanka, the UN Security Council met in formal session on Wednesday for the first time to consider the situation. The outcome was a non-binding resolution that effectively backed the Sri Lankan government and its criminal war. It "strongly condemned" the LTTE for its "acts of terrorism over many years" and urged it

to "lay down its arms and allow the tens of the thousands of civilians to leave".

Despite the evidence of the Sri Lankan military's war crimes, the resolution did not censure, let alone condemn, the Colombo government. While expressing "grave concern" for trapped civilians and urging the Sri Lankan army to ensure their safety, the Security Council did not call on the government to halt the fighting, only to end its use of heavy weapons. It also justified the communal war by acknowledging "the legitimate right of the government of Sri Lanka to combat terrorism".

The conflict in Sri Lanka is no more a "war on terrorism" than the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. The civil war that has lasted for more than a quarter of a century and cost at least 70,000 lives is a direct product of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination by successive Colombo governments. The Rajapakse regime is determined to crush the LTTE to consolidate the political and economic domination of the island's Sinhalese elites, at the expense of working people of all ethnic backgrounds.

The UN debate had nothing to do with concern on the part of the major powers for the plight of Tamil civilians. The US, Britain and France promoted the UN resolution as a means of pressuring the Colombo government to implement a "political solution" to end the war in a way that suits their strategic and economic interests in Sri Lanka and the broader region. China, Russia and Japan have resisted such a move, hoping to curry favour with Rajapakse and boost their own standing in Colombo.

As the war in Sri Lanka draws to its tragic close, all the powers that have backed the Rajapakse government for the past three years are now manoeuvring to exploit the carnage they have helped inflict on working people throughout the island.



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