

UN-based estimates put Sri Lankan civilian death toll at 20,000

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The British *Times* newspaper and France's *Le Monde* have both published articles pointing to a far higher civilian death toll in the final months of the civil war in Sri Lanka than previously reported. The reports come in the wake of a resolution sponsored by Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) last Wednesday blocking an investigation into war crimes committed during the fighting.

The *Times* article last Friday, based on UN sources, eyewitnesses and an examination of aerial photographs, put the civilian death toll in the final army offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at more than 20,000. Nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians were trapped inside the small pocket of LTTE territory and subjected to indiscriminate bombardment. Many died inside an area designated by the Colombo government as a "no fire" or safe zone.

A leaked UN report had previously estimated the number of civilian deaths at 7,000 for the period from January 20 to May 7. UN sources told the *Times* that the death toll surged to an average of 1,000 a day up until May 19, the day on which the army overran the remaining LTTE positions. Asked about the figure of 20,000, one UN source answered: "Higher, keep going." Father Amalraj, a Roman Catholic priest who fled the fighting on May 16 and is now in a detention camp, made similar estimates.

The newspaper published aerial photographs showing what remained of the safe zone: burned patches of land, blasted palm trees, burnt-out vehicles, skeletal houses and craters caused by bombardment by heavy weapons. The Sri Lankan government repeatedly claimed that the army had not used artillery in the final offensive. One photo shows a huge makeshift burial ground—long rows of mounds in the sand.

The government blamed all civilian casualties on the

LTTE. However, by examining the firing positions of the LTTE and the army, analysts concluded that it was unlikely that LTTE mortar or artillery fire caused a significant number of deaths. Charles Heyman, editor of the magazine *Armed Forces of the UK*, said: "It looks more likely that the firing position has been located by the Sri Lankan Army and it has then been targeted with air-burst and ground-impact mortars."

An article in the *Washington Post* on Saturday cited the analysis of high-resolution satellite photographs as evidence of army shelling of the "no-fire zone". Lars Bromley, from the American Association, told the newspaper: "We see a lot of images of destroyed buildings and what look like circular shell craters and also, frankly, very large holes in the ground. If it was a shell, it must be a very large one to make 24-foot-wide craters."

Thiru Kumarni, an elementary school principal, told the *Washington Post* that he was pinned down, with his students, in trenches for two weeks. He and the students held hands and fled from one trench to another to avoid fire. "We didn't think we would live. Some students were too afraid to move. We had to beg them. We were running out of water... Several students were killed and six went missing," he said.

A second *Times* article on Saturday reported that UN officials had told Vijar Nambiar, chief-of-staff for UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, that the estimated civilian death toll was more than 20,000. *Le Monde* also confirmed that Nambiar had been informed by UN staff that final figures "would without doubt exceed 20,000 dead". However, the UN has not made its estimates public.

An unnamed UN official told *Le Monde*: "We knew carnage was brewing. We rang the alarm bells for some months but no one ever took the Sri Lankan government to task publicly. Everyone is scared of having their agency removed from the country." The Sri Lankan government has

certainly treated international aid agencies with undisguised hostility, barring them from the war zone prior to May 19 and subsequently restricting their access to the huge detention centres established to house Tamil war refugees.

The UN official also told *Le Monde* that Nambiar had instructed UN representatives in Sri Lanka to “keep a low profile” and play a “sustaining role” that was “compatible with the government”. The newspaper questioned Nambiar’s impartiality, noting that his brother, Satish, a retired Indian general, had worked as a paid consultant to the Sri Lankan military since 2002.

The UN has become a diplomatic battleground in recent weeks as the US and European powers have pressed for the Sri Lankan government to make concessions to the Tamil elites through a “political solution” to end the war. The European Union called for last week’s UNHRC special session to press for a war crimes inquiry. The overriding objective of the Western powers is not concern for Tamil civilians, but to counter the growing influence of rivals, particularly China, in Colombo. China and Russia backed the Sri Lankan resolution in the UNHRC, which praised Colombo’s conduct of the war.

In the wake of last Wednesday’s vote, the articles in the *Times* and *Le Monde* reflect the bitter resentment of the US and its European allies at their defeat in the UNHRC and their determination to use the war crimes issue to maintain the pressure on the Sri Lankan government. The leaking of UN information indicating the scope of the army’s atrocities highlights the hypocrisy of the major powers, which have backed the Colombo government’s war and previously remained silent over its crimes during the past three years.

The Sri Lankan government rejected the claims made in the *Times* article. Lakshman Hullegalle, a senior official from the Media Centre for National Security, said the photographs were “totally unbelievable”. Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona said the *Times* was continuing a “bitter campaign against Sri Lanka”.

Speaking to Reuters in Singapore, Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama repeated the lie that the army had stopped using heavy weapons on April 27. He denounced all claims that the military was responsible for civilian deaths, saying: “This was both fictional and well fabricated with ulterior and sinister motives, in order to discredit the armed forces, as well as to embarrass the government of Sri Lanka.”

The government has gone to extraordinary lengths to prevent any independent reporting of what happened during the army’s offensive—blocking access to the war zone and to Tamil civilians being held in detention camps. Three government doctors, Dr. T. Sathyamoorthy, Dr. Varatharajah and Dr. Shanmugarajah, who remained in the war zone and provided the media with reports of the carnage being inflicted, were detained by police as “possible LTTE supporters” and face charges of having provided false information to the media.

Over the past three years, the security forces have acted with impunity. No serious investigation has been carried out into any of the hundreds of murders and “disappearances” by pro-government death squads. Following international outrage over the killing of 17 aid workers attached to the French-based Action Contre la Faim (ACF) during army operations in August 2006, President Mahinda Rajapakse established a presidential commission to investigate, but it is due to be shut down next month without writing a concluding report.

During last week’s UNHRC session, Sri Lankan ambassador Dayan Jayatilaka unintentionally made a revealing comment. Denouncing as “outrageous” the suggestion that the Colombo government should be investigated for war crimes, he declared that it was like asking the victorious allies of World War II to accept a war crimes tribunal for the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The comparison of what happened in northern Sri Lanka with that monstrous crime demonstrates that the Rajapakse government is well aware of the extent of the atrocities carried out by the military.



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