

Sri Lankan government coerces detained doctors to recant war casualty figures

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The Sri Lankan authorities brought five detained doctors to a press conference on July 8 to recant their previous eye-witness accounts of the military's shelling and killing of Tamil civilians during the final months of the offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The whole event was a stage-managed affair by the government to undermine incriminating evidence of the military's war crimes.

The media conference was conducted by the Defence Ministry at the Media Centre for National Security. The government medical officers on the stage included T. Varatharajah, the Vanni regional director of the health service, V. Shanmugarajah, a medical superintendent and T. Sathiyamurthy. The two other doctors were Sivapalan, who had served in the LTTE medical corps, and Ilancheliyan Pallavan, a government doctor.

All five had been held without charge for two months. After the media event, they were herded back into police criminal investigation department (CID) custody, with a police spokesman refusing to comment on what crimes they were alleged to have committed.

Between February and May, the three government medical officers provided on-the-spot accounts of the military's assault on the civilians, including patients in make-shift hospitals, who were trapped in the small "no fire" zone declared by the government on the island's north-eastern coast.

On February 2, for example, Dr Varatharajah reported that army shells had hit the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital women's wing and pediatrics unit, killing nine patients. Varatharajah reported three bombardments on the same day. Red Cross and UN personnel who were there confirmed that the attacks took place.

On May 11, Dr Shanmugarajah told the Associated Press that 430 civilians, including 106 children, had been brought for burial or died at a hospital after heavy shelling on May 9 and 10. He estimated more than 1,300 wounded civilians had been brought to the hospital for treatment.

After a third bombardment of the hospital on May 13, the doctors fled the war zone along with thousands of civilians under

heavy army shelling. They were immediately arrested by the army at a checkpoint to screen fleeing war victims.

Since then, they have been kept in custody, first by the military and then the CID, which has a notorious history of extracting confessions from detainees through torture. The doctors have been held incommunicado, without access to their relatives or lawyers.

In the final weeks of the military offensive, the doctors' statements to the international media about the casualties were the main source of information to the outside world about what was happening in the war zone. The government had banned independent media and aid agencies were ordered to withdraw from the area. UN human rights workers and the Red Cross initially had limited access to the hospitals but were later forced to withdraw.

While the doctors gave detailed first-hand accounts of the increasing attacks on hospitals during the war, at the press conference they denied any shelling of hospitals by the army.

Shanmugarajah said: "The information that I have given is false... The figures were exaggerated due to pressure from the LTTE." He also claimed that the information he had given on shortages of food and medical supplies was false, and that the LTTE had taken the supplies. Sathiyamurthy claimed that the LTTE had coerced the doctors to give information to the outside world and "sometimes they came with list of numbers [of casualty figures]".

Varatharajah drastically reduced the casualty figures given to the international media, saying that only 650 to 750 civilians were killed between January and mid-May, and that only 600 to 650 civilians were injured from January to April 15. In case reporters did not accept his new figures, he insisted: "It's difficult for you to believe, but it's true."

The doctors denied any pressure from government authorities to retract their earlier statements, but their press conference claims contained large holes and contradictions.

For instance, Varatharajah denied that the February 2 attack on the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital had happened, even though it had

been confirmed by Red Cross and UN witnesses. Gordon Weiss, the UN spokesperson in Sri Lanka, said 15 UN staff and 81 family members fled the area after the military pounded it with artillery fire for more than 16 hours on February 4.

As for the doctors' new claim that the injury toll was no more than 650, the Red Cross evacuated 13,769 patients to Trincomalee for medical treatment from the makeshift hospitals where the doctors were working.

After the doctors' media conference, Weiss said the UN had no grounds to change its estimates. "Their new testimony on Wednesday—of drastically reduced death tolls and casualty figures during shelling of civilian areas—contradicted reports from independent aid workers with the United Nations and the Red Cross who witnessed some of the violence."

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) spokeswoman in Colombo, Sarasi Wijeratne, told the WWS: "The ICRC firmly stands by what it stated as to the numbers and character of civilian casualties. There is absolutely no reason to change those. We made our estimates on the basis of the reliable sources particularly available to us."

Wijeratne insisted: "Although it is not within the purview of the ICRC to judge statements of a government, we have no reason to downgrade the truthfulness of our own objective assessments. Our assessment has been made on the basis of the observations of our own personnel who continued in the areas facing grave risks."

Sam Zarifi, the Asia-Pacific director for Amnesty International, expressed the conclusion of many critical observers, commenting that the doctors' retractions were "expected and predicted." He explained: "From the time the doctors were detained, the fear was that they would be used exactly this way."

Indicating the orchestrated nature of the press conference, the Associated Press reported: "The moderator introduced himself as a freelance journalist and two men in white shirts and ties sitting off to the side appeared to be giving him directions. When one of the doctors acknowledged he was currently imprisoned, a journalist for the state media berated him, saying he was well fed, clean shaven, wearing a tie and had a decent haircut, so he couldn't be a prisoner."

There are many obvious questions. If the doctors' previous comments were coerced, why have they been detained? Why have journalists, lawyers and relatives been prevented from speaking to them? The very fact that the doctors are still being held incommunicado—and could be detained for a year or more—signifies that the government has a great deal to hide.

An unpublished UN report, using information compiled from its local staff, the Red Cross, doctors and other sources, estimated that about 7,000 civilians died between January and the first week of May. Satellite photos leaked by the UN showed densely populated

civilian areas had been shelled.

In this context, the government is desperately sensitive about the doctors' previous statements, fearing domestic disaffection and international condemnation. President Mahinda Rajapakse repeatedly claimed in public speeches that not a single civilian was killed in the offensive. He falsely claimed that the military conducted "humanitarian operations" to free Tamils from the LTTE.

The government and the military have rejected calls by the UN and international humanitarian organisations for the release of the doctors, claiming that they are being interrogated over their connections with the LTTE. The police have refused to say if and when the doctors will be charged. The Associated Press reported that police spokesman Ranjith Gunasekera refused to comment on what crime the doctors had committed and said the confidential inquiry would continue.

Sri Lanka's pliant state and private media has said nothing about the blatant contradictions in the doctors' statements, nor commented on the conduct of the media conference and the continued detention of the five men. During the war, media outlets and journalists were themselves constantly threatened, and several media personnel were killed or abducted and physically harassed for even expressing mild criticisms of the conduct of the war.

The police-state methods being used against the doctors are in line with the indefinite detention of nearly 300,000 Tamil war refugees in military-controlled camps, where even the Red Cross and UN aid agencies are increasingly being denied access. These measures are a warning about how far the government will go to hide its criminal record, and its willingness to trample over the most basic legal and democratic rights.



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