Video evidence of Sri Lankan government war crimes

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A video, broadcast on the British-based "Channel 4 News" this week, has provided further first-hand evidence of the war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan government and its military forces during the final stages of its crushing of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The video footage, screened on the CNN-affiliate on August 25, shows Sri Lankan soldiers executing naked, bound and blindfolded men in cold blood. The men appear to be Tamils. It is not known whether they were LTTE fighters or civilians.

First, a naked man, his hands bound behind his back, is pushed to the ground. Then a man in military uniform delivers a forceful kick to the back of the prisoner's head with the heel of his boot. As the prisoner slumps forward, another soldier points his automatic weapon and fires a single shot. The man's body jolts. "It's like he jumped," laughs one of the giggling soldiers. Off-camera, someone can be heard saying in Sinhala, "I think he looked back."

As gunfire rattles, the camera pans left to reveal a further seven bloodstained bodies, all naked but one, strewn on the ground. The camera then pans right again, as another naked man is forced to the ground and shot in the back of the head. This time the body falls backwards. Off-camera, a voice can be heard saying, "This is like hitting midgets." (The video can be viewed here)

The footage was obtained by Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS), an organisation made up of several dozen Sinhalese and Tamil journalists who have fled into exile in recent years as the intimidation and killing of media professionals by pro-government thugs has soared. The group, whose members now live mostly in Europe, said the film was taken by a Sri Lankan soldier in January using his mobile phone as the army was battling to take the LTTE's stronghold of Kilinochchi.

A spokesman for JDS told the media: "It was as if someone was filming it for fun. This was being circulated by the soldiers. It has been going round for a while. It was taken as if it was a souvenir." He said rumours of such footage had existed for a long time but that this was the first time such film had entered "the mainstream".

What the video depicts are clear war crimes in violation of the Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as experts cited by international media outlets, said they found nothing in the video that would dispute its authenticity.

On Friday, after the video was broadcast by the electronic media in many countries, Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions, joined the renewed calls by Amnesty and Human Rights Watch for an independent investigation into the war crimes committed in Sri Lanka.

The footage adds to the ample evidence that already exists about the atrocities committed by President Mahinda Rajapakse's regime during the final offensives against the LTTE, in which, according to UN sources, about 20,000 Tamil civilians died. Security forces used indiscriminate aerial bombing and artillery and mortar fire in repeated drives to exterminate the LTTE and terrorise the entire Tamil population.

First-hand accounts of the bombardments were given by doctors and aid workers in the war zone and the

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Times of London published aerial photographs of the government-designated safe zone on the north-eastern Mullativu coast, where tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were trapped. The pictures showed burned patches of land, blasted palm trees, burnt-out vehicles, skeletal houses and craters caused by the shelling.

Over the past three years, human rights organisations have accumulated considerable evidence pointing to the hundreds of murders and "disappearances" by pro-government death squads operated either directly or indirectly by the military. Young Tamils, journalists and politicians have been among the victims. None of those responsible have been brought to trial

The video is the first direct evidence that the army has carried out summary executions. The fact that the soldiers involved joked about the killings, allowed themselves to be videoed and that the video was passed around tends to indicate that the practice was widespread. Those involved clearly felt that they could kill with impunity.

Without even the pretence of any investigation of the video, the Sri Lankan regime immediately denounced it as a fake, just as it has done with every other piece of evidence that has emerged. As soon as the Channel 4 broadcast was aired, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara declared that the video clip was a "fabrication" aimed to "discredit the armed forces". As usual, the military's spokesman provided no proof for his assertion.

Likewise, the Sri Lankan High Commissioner for Britain, Nihal Jayasinghe, said "the army never engaged with Tamil civilians" and "the war was only with the LTTE". But he refused Channel 4's request for an interview.

These denials have no credibility. The regime has lied repeatedly about its conduct of the war, and unashamedly sought to cover up its crimes, including by preventing any media access to the witnesses and other evidence, and blocking any independent investigation. As the military struggle intensified in January, the Rajapakse government even ordered aid workers to withdraw from the remaining LTTE-controlled areas, despite the critical lack of social services.

Apart from a brief guided tour, organised by the military establishment for selected journalists to accompany UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon after the fighting ended in May, no independent media personnel were allowed into the war zone.

On May 27, the government, backed by China and Russia, won a vote in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to block a limited resolution by Switzerland calling for an investigation of violations of human rights and international law by both the military and the LTTE during the war in Sri Lanka. Instead, a resolution was passed hailing the government's victory in the communal war against the LTTE.

Three months since the end of the war, the government is still indefinitely detaining some 280,000 Tamil civilians behind barbed wire fences and barring the media and opposition parties from the camps. Aid workers working inside the camps have been forced to pledge not speak to the detainees—the main witnesses—about what happened in the last stages of the war. This week's video evidence lends disturbing weight to the reports of continuing "disappearances" of alleged LTTE suspects from the detention camps.

The summary executions and brutality shown on the video are further testimony to the communal character of the three-decade civil war conducted by the Colombo establishment against the Tamil population. At the same time, the methods used by the soldiers are a warning of the type of measures that the government will use more broadly against working people as it now pursues an "economic war" to make the working class and rural masses pay for the deep economic crisis produced by the war and the global recession.

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