

Sri Lankan government expels UNICEF spokesman

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The Sri Lankan government has ordered James Elder, the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF) spokesman in Colombo, to leave the country within two weeks. The directive is another crude attempt to cover up the criminal nature of the government's anti-Tamil war that ended in mid-May and the appalling conditions inside the internment camps where around 280,000 Tamil civilians remain detained.

Elder was summoned to the foreign ministry in Colombo on September 6 and told that his residential visa had been cancelled as of September 7. It had been valid until July next year. After making a special request, Elder, who has worked in Sri Lanka for UNICEF since 2008, was given until September 21 to leave the country.

Elder was given no official reason for the decision. On Monday, however, Palitha Kohona, the former foreign secretary and now Sri Lanka's ambassador to the UN, claimed that the UNICEF spokesman had been issuing statements supporting the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Kohona told Agence France Presse (AFP): "Mr. Elder was doing propaganda in support of the LTTE," and added, "Towards the end of the conflict, he issued statements that were not researched, not exactly based on fact, but reflective of the LTTE." Kohona did not cite any of Elder's specific comments to back the allegations.

P. B. Abeykoon, controller of immigration and emigration, told the media that the decision had been made some months ago and based on Elder's "adverse remarks" to the media.

Elder's expulsion again demonstrates that the Sri Lankan government will not tolerate any, even limited, criticism of its conduct of the war and the ongoing repressive measures against the country's Tamil minority. Anyone who contradicts its own brazen falsifications is denounced as a "terrorist supporter" and threatened with arrest or worse.

In the final months of the war, the government denied the media access to the front lines and repeatedly lied to cover up its crimes. According to UN estimates, at least 20,000 civilians were killed as the military indiscriminately bombarded LTTE-held territory from the ground and air. After the collapse of the LTTE in May, the army herded civilians into so-called welfare camps, guarded by soldiers.

The UNICEF spokesman was targeted because he provided limited information about the desperate plight of children during the final stages of the war. President Mahinda Rajapakse and his ministers ludicrously insisted that not a single civilian was killed in these attacks.

In February, Elder said that he saw injuries suffered by children, including "babies with shrapnel wounds, gunshot injuries and blast wounds". In May, toward the end of the conflict, he described the war zone as "an unimaginable hell" where hundreds of children had been killed.

"It is hard to think of a worse place on earth to be right now than on that stretch of beach. It is a bloodbath. It is a catastrophic situation. We are seeing a complete disregard for civilian life," he added. Elder

said civilians trapped in the war zone faced “indiscriminate firing from all sides” of the conflict.

Commenting on the conditions facing civilians detained in government centres, Elder said: “It’s important to remember these people have arrived in camps in the worst possible state. They are hungry and sick, and many still have untended wounds from the war.”

In June he told the *Australian* newspaper that “[T]he nutritional situation of children [in the camps] is a huge concern for UNICEF; restrictions on access [to camps] hinder our ability to save lives.”

As these statements indicate, Elder was simply carrying out his job as a spokesperson for UNICEF, drawing attention to the plight of children caught up in the war and now interned indefinitely in detention camps.

UNICEF’s regional chief of communications, Sarah Crowe, immediately opposed Elder’s expulsion and said he should continue in his position. She told AFP: “James Elder has been UNICEF’s voice advocating on behalf of those who do not have a voice—children and the most vulnerable”.

A statement from the UN secretary-general’s office said that Ban Ki-moon “strongly regrets the decision” to expel Elder. Elder’s work, it added, “includes making public statements when necessary in an effort to save lives and prevent grave humanitarian problems”.

The UN issued another statement yesterday expressing concern about the arrest in June of two staff members, who are Sri Lankan nationals and were working for the UN in the northern town of Vavuniya. In May, the UN spokesman in Colombo, Gordon Weiss, became the target of pro-government protesters, vitriolic media comment and threats of expulsion after he described the final three weeks of the war as “a bloodbath”.

Elder’s expulsion is part of the government’s ongoing efforts to suppress any examination of its

crimes and abuse of basic democratic rights. After President Rajapakse plunged the country back to war in July 2006, the military banned all media coverage from the front lines. As the war reached a critical stage in September 2008, the government expelled all aid agencies from the war zone, except the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations.

The only first-hand reports of the final months of fighting came from four government doctors—T. Varatharajah, the Vanni regional director of the health service, V. Shanmugarajah, a medical superintendent, T. Sathiyamurthy and Ilancheliyan Pallavan—who ran makeshift hospitals in the area. They were eventually forced to leave by heavy fighting in early May.

The four doctors, and another from the LTTE’s own medical service, were later detained by the military after they entered government-controlled areas. They were branded as LTTE supporters for revealing how government bombs and shelling had killed innocent civilians. The four doctors were held for two months before being released on bail under heavy restrictions.

The government has also banned all media from the detention camps and placed severe restrictions on aid agencies and all visitors. The US-based Human Rights Watch has revealed that aid workers are now forced to sign a document promising not to provide information about conditions inside the camps without government permission.

The expulsion of Elder goes hand in hand with Sri Lanka government’s contempt for the law and ongoing abuse of basic democratic rights.



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