

# ICG report exposes Sri Lankan government's war crimes

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A 54-page report by the Brussels-based think tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), provides further evidence of major war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan government and military in the final months of the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The report, released on Monday to coincide with the first anniversary of the LTTE's defeat, not only puts the scale of civilian casualties far higher than previous UN estimates, but declares that the ICG has credible evidence to suggest that the Sri Lankan military intentionally shelled civilians, hospitals and humanitarian operations.

The report covers the period from January to May 2009, after the military had driven the LTTE out of its stronghold of Kilinochchi. The LTTE's forward lines rapidly collapsed, forcing a retreat toward Mullaivivu on the northeastern coast. In the final weeks, more than 300,000 civilians were trapped, along with LTTE fighters, in a tiny pocket of land that was repeatedly shelled and bombed.

The government continually denied that it was responsible for any civilian deaths, blaming all casualties on the LTTE. At the same time, it blocked any independent coverage of the unfolding tragedy by barring journalists from the frontlines and restricting aid agencies. Government spokesmen dismissed on-the-spot news that filtered out from aid workers and doctors as "LTTE propaganda" and denounced cautious statements by UN officials of the carnage underway as false.

ICG report is based on eyewitness statements, photographs, video satellite images, electronic communications and documents from a wide range of sources. Its evidence suggests that in the final five months "tens of thousands of Tamil civilian men, women, children and the elderly [were] killed, countless more wounded, and hundreds of thousands deprived of adequate food and medical care, resulting in more deaths".

The UN estimated at the time that 7,000 civilians were killed, many by the military's indiscriminate shelling and strafing, including people gathered in an area declared a "no fire zone" by the Colombo government.

The ICG figures are based on comparing the number of civilians known to be inside LTTE territory with the number who fled after the LTTE collapsed and were herded into military-run detention camps. The report concludes that it is difficult "to arrive at a figure for the killed or missing that is lower than 30,000". As an upper estimate, it

states that "there is a plausible case that as many as 75,000 persons remain unaccounted for".

The vast majority of these deaths resulted from the actions of the government and military—either directly through shelling or indirectly by blocking aid supplies, including food and medicines, and strafing the rudimentary hospitals operating inside LTTE-held territory. All these actions constitute serious breaches of international law.

Urging an international inquiry, the ICG states that the evidence "provides reasonable grounds to believe that Sri Lankan security forces committed war crimes with top government and military leaders potentially responsible". It concludes that the military repeatedly and increasingly subjected civilians to intense artillery and mortar barrages, "despite the government and security forces knowing the size and location of the civilian population and scale of civilian casualties".

"The security forces shelled hospitals and makeshift medical centres—many overflowing with the wounded and sick—on multiple occasions even though they knew of their precise locations and functions. During these incidents, medical staff, the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and others continually informed the government and security forces of the shelling, yet they continued to strike medical facilities," the report states.

The report adds: "Despite knowing the exact location of humanitarian operations and food distribution points, the security forces repeatedly shelled these areas, which were crowded with humanitarian workers, vehicles and supplies, and civilians. Many were killed or wounded trying to deliver or receive basic humanitarian assistance including women, children and infants." The government also obstructed food and medical supplies, including by knowingly claiming that the civilian population was one third its actual size.

The report provides details of a number of specific war crimes, while pointing out that these cases constitute only a small fraction of what must be investigated. Some of the military's attacks on hospitals included:

\* On February 1 an attack on the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital killed 9 people and injured another 20. At the time there were 500 patients under treatments. The ICRC issued a statement on the incident. On February 4, ICRC staff and 300 patients fled to Putumattalan.

\* The Ponnambalam Memorial Hospital in Puthukkudiyiruppu was bombed on February 6. About 75 people, including patients, were killed. The next day, the air force falsely announced the attack was on the hideout of a senior LTTE leader, Soosai.

\* Government doctors converted a school in Putumattalan into a makeshift hospital. UN and ICRC officials informed the military of its precise location but it was repeatedly shelled despite being inside the “no-fire zone” from February 12. The bombing intensified as the military prepared its final offensive.

\* A second makeshift hospital at a school in Mullivaikkal faced the deadliest attacks. According to the eyewitness, the military surveyed the area with an unmanned drone. The first shelling came on April 30 and May 2. As the military shelled the entire area on May 11, staff had to abandon the hospital.

The ICG report also provides evidence of war crimes carried out by the LTTE, including intentionally killing or wounding civilians trying to flee the area, and forcibly recruiting civilians to fight or work as labourers. The shootings point to the fact that the LTTE had long since lost the active support of the Tamil population.

The LTTE’s program of a separate capitalist state of Eelam always represented the interests of the Tamil elite, not the majority of Tamil workers and the rural poor. Increasingly, the LTTE resorted to thuggery to suppress any political opposition. In the final months of the war, the LTTE was incapable of making any appeal to Tamil workers in Sri Lanka, let alone the working class in the rest of the island and throughout the region.

Significantly, the ICG only deals with the last five months of the war—when the US and the European powers began to raise limited criticisms of the atrocities being carried out by the military. While the conflict was certainly most intense in this period, this focus downplays the military’s previous crimes—when the US and the EU were supporting the government’s war.

Like the US and EU, the ICG supports the Sri Lankan government’s claim that LTTE breaches of the 2002 ceasefire were responsible for the renewed war in 2006. In fact, President Mahinda Rajapakse’s demand for the renegotiation of the ceasefire—along with the provocative murder of high-level LTTE supporters—ensured that peace talks would fail.

In July 2006, the military launched its first offensive in open violation of the ceasefire, using the pretext that the LTTE had closed the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate and the operation was essential on “humanitarian grounds” to provide water to farmers downstream. Having restarted the war, the army’s offensives continued unabated, with military assistance from the US, India, China and Pakistan. None of these powers condemned Rajapakse for effectively tearing up the ceasefire agreement.

The military’s brutal methods were evident well before the beginning of 2009. The army deliberately targeted civilians and civilian targets within LTTE-held territory as a means of stampeding the civilian population and clearing the way for a ground advance. In

the eastern areas of Muttur, Sampur, Vaharai, Thopur and Karaithivu, these methods were used to drive out more than 200,000 civilians.

The US and European powers only began to criticise the Rajapakse government and call for a political solution to the war when it became evident that the LTTE was on the point of military collapse. Along with concerns that a bloodbath would have a destabilising impact in southern India as well as Sri Lanka, the US and its allies used the “human rights” issue as a means of pressuring the Colombo government and undercutting the rising influence of China.

Washington’s limited criticisms have been downplayed further in the wake of a report published by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations last December. It concluded that Sri Lanka was of such strategic significance that the US could not afford to “lose” the island to American rivals—above all China. The report urged an approach that appreciated “new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and US geostrategic interests” and was not driven “solely by short-term humanitarian concerns”.

On Monday, in order to placate the US and European powers, President Rajapakse appointed an eight-member commission under the title “Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation” to examine the events from February 2002 to May 2009. The Commission has been charged with reporting whether any person, group or institution directly or indirectly bears responsibility for ceasefire violations. The commission will whitewash the record of the government and security forces in the same way as Rajapakse’s previous inquiries.

Despite its limitations, the ICG report squarely poses the issue of the Sri Lankan government’s war crimes. President Rajapakse, his ministers, top generals and senior bureaucrats, particularly the president’s brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, are war criminals responsible for mass killings. They will not be brought to justice by the very powers that were complicit in their crimes. That will only take place as part of a broader political movement of the working class, fighting for democratic rights and the defence of living standards on the basis of a socialist program.



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