

Sri Lanka's Killing Fields

British television documents Sri Lankan war crimes

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In the last months of the 30-year civil war, early in 2009, the Sri Lankan military forced some 300,000 Tamils into a succession of “No Fire Zones” on the north-eastern coast.

Described by the government as a humanitarian rescue operation, it was used to facilitate the targeted shelling of civilians. A United Nations report earlier this year confirmed widespread war crimes and crimes against humanity. The government, which had banned local and international media from the war zone, denies this. Over the last two years a team from Channel 4 News has amassed mobile phone footage filmed inside the war zone. The resulting documentary provides harrowing evidence of the atrocities committed.

The banning of the media was only one tactic employed by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse to give the army a free hand in what he had pledged would be a war to the end against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Towards the end of 2008, the government told relief agencies and foreign observers that they could no longer guarantee their safety in the north of the country.

Accepting the government's decision, the UN officially withdrew its staff from the Tamil administrative centre of Kilinochchi. Gordon Weiss, former UN spokesman, told Channel 4 he believed the government decision was “intended to remove independent witnesses to what was coming”.

Other UN officials said they felt the decision to withdraw was wrong. The earliest footage presented was filmed by UN officials as they left, with Tamil civilians urging them not to abandon them to the army.

In January 2009 Kilinochchi fell, and with it the regional Tamil administration. The Rajapakse

government, which had the support of most international governments, escalated its assault. Along with the LTTE, hundreds of thousands of civilians were trapped as they tried to flee. The government set up its first “No Fire Zone” (NFZ), which contained 300,000-400,000 civilians. This zone was monitored by the UN from Colombo.

Doctors went to the NFZ and set up a hospital. Heavy artillery was focused on the NFZ, while the government claimed they were carrying out a humanitarian rescue operation of civilians. The Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK) hospital was shelled every day for a week in an intensifying bombing campaign.

The documentary broadcast footage of the shelling and its aftermath taken inside PTK. Over footage of his 14-year old son dying in the hospital, one witness described the artillery attack that killed him. The documentary also interviewed Vany Kumar, a British Tamil biomedical technician who had been visiting Sri Lanka and assisted in the hospitals within the NFZs.

There were allegations that the military were firing a delayed second shell in order to target those assisting the victims of a first shell. William Schabas, a professor of human rights, indicated the suspicion that the NFZ simply packaged up civilians for further attack.

The programme documents the LTTE's own killing of civilians, with footage of Tigers firing to prevent civilians leaving areas, and photographic evidence of an LTTE suicide bomber killing soldiers and civilians. By this stage, however, the LTTE was effectively defeated, and the government's policies were a clear indication of attempts to suppress the Tamil population by violence.

The government established a second NFZ, this time

on the sandspit of Valaignarmadam. The army shelled food supply lines, before launching an artillery campaign to cut it in half. By the end of April the government was claiming there were only 10,000 people left there. The real figure was closer to 200,000. Gordon Weiss has suggested this was to prevent any proper accounting for the scale of civilian casualties.

Again the documentary provided grim evidence of the repeated bombing of hospitals in the NFZ. Following their usual procedure in conflict zones, the Red Cross, equipped with GPS devices, supplied the army with the coordinates of medical facilities to ensure their safety. One hour after they supplied the army with coordinates of a hospital ward, it was shelled. Tamil doctors asked the Red Cross to stop providing coordinates.

The documentary provides a devastating insight into the conditions within these besieged hospitals, which were desperately short of facilities. A hospital administrator, filmed discussing their shortages, was later killed in a shell attack. Vany Kumar describes fainting while assisting in the amputation of a shattered arm and leg from a six-year-old without anaesthetic and using only an ordinary knife.

The hospitals were moved several times. Eventually the hospital was closed, which is where the Tamil footage here ends.

Despite the ban on international observers in the war zone, the UN initially suggested 7,000 had died there. The figure has now been revised up to around 40,000, and the programme was very clear on the lies of the Rajapakse government.

The last part of the documentary used a lot of mobile phone “trophy” footage shot by army soldiers. Along with the military targeting of civilians, the army was also responsible for the execution and torture of prisoners. There was footage of bound naked prisoners being executed, with soldiers being told how to administer the killing headshot. The footage has been verified by the UN.

An LTTE conscript describes being tied to a tree and watching another prisoner being beheaded. There were accounts of the rape of civilian women who had handed themselves over to the army for protection.

The film provides evidence of the torture and execution of LTTE leaders after their surrender or capture. The government released photographs of the body of Colonel Ramesh, saying he was killed on the

last day of fighting, 18 May, 2009. New footage of him alive suggests that the injuries shown in the photograph were sustained during post-detention torture. Similarly, the LTTE leader Nadesan made a genuine attempt to surrender. The photograph of his corpse indicates that he was executed by a gunshot to the head, suggesting post-surrender murder.

The programme provided compelling evidence of the scale and character of the war crimes committed by the Rajapakse government. Rajapakse is directly implicated. His brother Gotabhaya is defence secretary. The government refused to participate in or comment on the programme, and has also rejected the UN Expert Panel report indicating the extent of war crimes.

The north of Sri Lanka is still under military clampdown, and the programme touched briefly on the internment camps set up for Tamil civilians. The measures undertaken of the Rajapakse government pose a threat to the whole of the Sri Lankan working class.

The programme asked about the possibility of justice for the victims of these war crimes. It concluded that the prospects are not good, given the involvement of the international ruling elite and its support for Rajapakse’s government.

UN General Secretary Ban-Ki Moon was shown around the internment camps by government and military officials. Ban has rejected the UN Expert Panel’s recommendation for a criminal investigation following its report. Steve Crawshaw of Amnesty International pointed to the difference in response between this case and that of Libya.

The programme was rightly dismissive of Rajapakse’s sham Committee on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation, a venture that has been publicly backed by Washington. A cable released by WikiLeaks revealed that the Obama administration was well aware of the war crimes as they were being committed.



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