

French humanitarian group alleges Sri Lankan security forces executed aid workers

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Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger or ACF), a French-based humanitarian organisation, has issued a report alleging that Sri Lanka's security forces killed 17 of its aid workers in eastern Muttur, near Trincomalee, in 2006. The murders occurred a few weeks after Colombo, in an open breach of a 2002 Ceasefire Agreement, resumed its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The ACF decided to make its own findings public because the Sri Lankan justice system was "incapable of investigating the case." The report, which was the result of a seven year investigation, alleges that those responsible for the killings had been "protected by Sri Lankan authorities."

The cold-blooded, execution-style murder of the aid workers occurred as government forces and the LTTE were engaged a fierce battle for control of Muttur. Heavy artillery barrages caused thousands of civilians to flee the area. The ACF workers were executed on August 4, 2006 after being trapped in the aid organisation's Muttur office. Sixteen of the workers were Tamils and one a Muslim. Four of the 17 killed were women.

The report adds to the mountain of evidence exposing war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan security forces during the civil war that eventually ended in May 2009. A UN study has estimated that some 40,000 civilians were killed during the final weeks of the conflict. The ACF report provides a detailed account of a systematic cover up by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The Sri Lankan military immediately issued a statement rejecting the ACF report, claiming it was an attempt to "level allegations against the government of Sri Lanka without providing sufficient details to enable an investigation." In fact, the aim of the military and

the government all along has been to prevent any serious investigation of any of its atrocities.

The ACF workers were killed despite assurances from Trincomalee police headquarters that they would be safe and given passage to Trincomalee. While the ACF provided the security forces with the exact GPS location of its mission to assist in an evacuation, the "security forces apparently tried to conceal the massacre and make an effective investigation impossible."

The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission, which over saw the so-called peace process, and the ACF were all barred from entering the area until August 7. While the Sri Lankan security forces claimed it was not safe for these organisations to enter the area, the army had been providing escorted tours to Muttur for select journalists and others since August 5. This was because the "government was keen to demonstrate its victory in taking control over the town," the ACF report said.

The police claimed that they did not discover the massacre until the evening of August 6, despite strong evidence to the contrary, including detailed information about the killings provided by the ACF. The report notes that even then, "nothing was done to collect evidence and proceed to investigation." No request was made for an order from the local magistrate to collect the bodies or preserve the crime scene, the report stated, "obviously in an attempt to destroy evidence."

The report claims that aid workers who collected the bodies were harassed and threatened. While police claimed that the dead were "LTTE supporters," an official police report attempted to blame the LTTE for the murders. Apart from some of the victims' relatives, the police also failed to interview any security forces personnel or other key witnesses.

The ACF report also states that the Presidential Commission of Inquiry (CoI) between 2007 and 2010 was “biased.” In fact, the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons, which was appointed to observe the official investigation into human rights abuses, including the Muttur massacre, resigned in 2008, declaring that it “fell short of international norms and standards.”

During this period “witnesses had been approached by the Police, the Army and unidentified persons, harassed and compelled not to testify against government forces”. One witness to the Muttur massacre was threatened by “police officers assigned to the CoI’s Investigation Unit,” the ACF report notes. The French-based aid group states that Sri Lankan authorities had obstructed the investigation and “succeeded in preventing [an] indictment of the security forces.”

The ACF report also notes that individuals identified as “direct perpetrators of the killings” in an investigation conducted by the Jaffna-based University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) were “sent abroad for protection by order of the Sri Lankan defense secretary [Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother].”

Other evidence collected by the ACF includes a message heard in communication equipment at the Muttur police station ordering military personnel stationed in the area “to kill all persons who wore civil clothes and spoke Tamil.” The ACF states that there is a direct relationship between this communication and the massacre and notes that it was typical of the sort of security forces messages during the war and which highlight its communal, anti-Tamil character.

Further ACF evidence notes that a 5.56 mm calibre bullet recovered from one of the aid workers’ bodies disappeared during the official inquiry. “Such cartridges were generally used by the Special Task Force and by some Special Forces within the Sri Lankan Army and Navy,” the report states.

The ACF report is a clear rebuttal of the so-called Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) that Colombo claimed was an “independent” inquiry into the protracted civil war. It also undermines the latest investigation into the massacre announced by the Rajapakse government, following pressure from United States and other western countries.

The ACF evidence further confirms information previously revealed in US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks. These include confirmation by former US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Robert O. Blake that the UTHR findings into the massacre were “to a large extent accurate.”

While the US has sought to pressure Sri Lankan government over “human rights”, backing two UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions about the final months of the war, the WikiLeaks cables reveal that Washington was fully aware of the crimes committed by Rajapakse government and its security forces well before 2009.



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