Mass graves in Mannar point to further war crimes in Sri Lanka

Murali Maran, Vimal Rasenthiran
4 October 2018

Another mass grave has been uncovered in Sri Lanka, near Mannar, a town in the Northern province, where the almost 30-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) resulted in thousands of deaths.

According to reports last month, the skeletal remains of 136 individuals were unearthed from a site near the town after 74 days of excavation. It was the second mass grave discovered in the area since the war ended in 2009. The first, which contained 84 skeletons, was found in nearby Thiruketheeswaram in 2013. The graves point to some of the gruesome war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan military during the conflict.

Judicial Medical Officer Dr Saminda Rajapakse told the media on September 19 that forensic excavators at Mannar had found the bones of children among the skeletons. He said all the skeletons were being kept in a special room at the Mannar court complex and would be sent for carbon-dating in the US.

The human remains were accidentally found on March 27, as workers dug soil for a building construction. The official exhumation process was conducted in the presence of a magistrate. Once it was confirmed that the bones and teeth were human, the excavation continued under the supervision of the judicial medical officer and Professor Raj Somadeva of the Department of Archaeology.

Somadeva told the media that the excavation area had two sections. “In one segment we have a proper cemetery. In the other part, you have a collection of human skeletons that have been deposited in an informal way.”

The bodies in the second area, he said, were placed in the pit without clothes or other personal items that could lead to their identification. He revealed that there were at least 16 children among the dead. Dr Rajapakse told a press conference in July that some skeletons showed evidence of limbs being tied, suggesting execution-style killings.

According to local residents, the mass grave could date back to 1990, when the government re-escalated the war after a brief truce with the LTTE. There was a navy checkpoint at the time near the current excavation site.

In April, Vanni district parliamentarian Charles Nirmalanathan said: “I do not think that human residues identified in the area were buried by ordinary people. The army’s permanent camp and military intelligence surveillance was located only 50 metres from this mass grave. The region was directly controlled by the military after the war began.”

Sothilingam, a resident of Manthai, near Mannar, told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters: “The government and the military claim that both sites were cemeteries. If that is true, there should have been a cemetery in the middle of the street in Manthai or within the shopping complex in Mannar town. The mainstream media is also instrumental in this cover-up.”

Ketheeswaran, another local resident, asked: “Is it a cemetery when more than 100 people are buried in the same pit? There is no doubt, in my mind, that this is a grave established by the state forces.

“We don’t know how many graves are inside the jungle area but the government’s actions are suspicious. The military has forcibly occupied over 20 acres, and a Buddhist temple, established after 1990, occupies 10 acres. The area from Mullipallam to Pappamottai has been declared a bird sanctuary.”

A female resident told the WSWS that the navy and army burnt shops in Mannar and murdered civilians in the 1990s. Recalling one incident, she said the military

© World Socialist Web Site

shot and killed a teacher and his wife from Jaffna, and then tied their bodies onto a jeep in the street.

Like its predecessors, the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is attempting to whitewash these crimes. Recent court orders have banned journalists from taking photographs at the mass grave site, and about three weeks ago, a Mannar magistrate limited all media briefings to just 30 minutes.

Mass graves have also been found in Chemmani, in the Jaffna area, and at Ambilipitiya, Sooriyakanda and Matale in Sri Lanka's south. Over 200,000 people are estimated to have died in the war against the LTTE in the North and East, and in the civil insurgency by rural Sinhala youth in the South.

Five years ago, a mass grave was found at Matale district in the Central Province, a Sinhala majority area. Investigations have been stalled at this site, which may date back to 1987–90, when the military and pro-government death squads killed more than 60,000 rural youth.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), whose members were the main target in these killings, has provided tacit support to the government and its attempts to bury details about the Matale grave.

A similar burial ground from this period was discovered at Sooriyakanda by political supporters of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, just before the 1994 parliamentary election. After being exploited for political advantage during the election, the issue was swept under the carpet. The JVP supported Kumaratunga and kept quiet about the mass grave.

The pseudo-left parties, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party and Frontline Socialist Party, are maintaining a notable silence over the mass graves. The Tamil and Muslim communal parties, such as the Muslim Congress and the Tamil National Alliance, have responded to the mounting evidence of the military's war crimes in the North and East with limited rhetoric.

All sections of the ruling class, conscious that similar atrocities will be used to suppress the emerging struggles of the workers, oppressed and students, are strengthening their efforts to hide these crimes.

After claiming that they would investigate all human rights violations, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have declared that the military forces were "war heroes," who committed no atrocities and would not be hauled before the courts. Sirisena recently appealed to the UN General Assembly to stop raising questions about the military's war crimes.

This ongoing whitewash of terrible atrocities demonstrates that any authentic investigation into the crimes committed during the communal war and the civil insurgencies of 1971 and 1987–90, are only possible as part of the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government, based on socialist and internationalist principles.

The authors also recommend:

Eyewitness account from Sri Lanka: Tamil mass graves excavated in Chemmani
[26 June 1999]

Sri Lankan mass grave recalls rural massacres
[29 April 2013]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site