

Another mass grave found in Sri Lanka's war-torn Kokkuthodduwai

P.T. Sampanthar, Wasantha Rupasinghe
27 September 2023

Another mass grave has been discovered at Kokkuthodduwai in the Mullaitivu district of Sri Lanka's Northern Province where the racist war carried out by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May 2009.

The site was accidentally found on June 29 by National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) workers while digging on a water-related project. The workers told the police, who informed the Mullaitivu Magistrate Court which ordered excavation of the suspected mass grave on July 6.

The excavation team was led by Senior Archaeologist Professor Raj Somadeva working under the supervision of Mullaitivu Magistrate Tharmalingam Piradeepan. Former Jaffna University Professor Pusparatnam and students, Mullaitivu judicial medical officer Kanakasabapathy Vasudeva and Jaffna judicial medical officer S. Piranavan were also involved.

While the exhumation stopped on September 18, the government-run *Daily News*, reported 17 females and one male have so far been found. The media has suggested that the human remains could be of former LTTE members who surrendered to the Sri Lankan military during the war. Recovered uniforms, which are similar to those worn by the LTTE, strongly back this suspicion. Various other objects, such as pieces of plastic and wire, were also found.

Indicating that the mass grave could be the result of war crimes, an excavation official told the media that the skeletons were "haphazardly" placed in the pit and not in an "orderly manner." According to the local press, the area was the site of many army camps between 1984 and the end of the war in 2009.

M.A. Sumanthiran, a lawyer and a parliamentarian from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil bourgeois party, publicly accused the excavation team of

failing to follow "any technical procedures," stating that "the excavation and the recovery of human remains seems very haphazard."

The state, he told the media, is "not interested in finding out the entire truth around this particular site. We could even say that the state intends to cover up any truths that may emerge from investigating this mass grave site."

The government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe and the capitalist state want to cover up the truth about this mass grave and other war crimes committed by the military during the protracted communal war.

Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) initiated the conflict in July 1983 and continued it ruthlessly, along with successive Colombo governments. Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed.

Sumanthiran's mild criticism of the government's excavations of the mass grave is aimed at deflecting attention from the TNA's collaboration with the UNP, past and present. At the same time his remarks are an attempt to exploit the deep-going anger of the Tamil masses over the war crimes committed during the conflict.

The government initially tried to block any excavation of the burial grounds, claiming that the Mullaitivu District Secretariat did not have the funds.

"I know nothing about this burial ground," Public Security Ministry Secretary Liani Gunathilaka told the *Daily Morning* on July 12, in an attempt to wash the government's hands of any responsibility.

Arrangements were only made to excavate after protests by Tamil people in the area. On July 12, families of the disappeared in Mullaitivu demanded "international oversight" of the ongoing excavation. These demands were ignored by government. Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) reported on July 20, that a high-level meeting of government authorities "ruled out any international involvement in the investigation."

On July 29, a massive *hartal* (total closure of businesses

and offices) was observed in the North and East, demanding “Justice for the Kokkuthodduwai burial ground.”

The government’s arbitrary decision not to allow to any international investigation of the mass grave is another indication of its acute nervousness over any exposure of war crimes. As the UN Human Rights Commission and other international organisations have documented, the Sri Lankan military operated with complete impunity during the war killing tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and injuring many more. Despite the existence of powerful evidence, only a handful of minor players—lower rank soldiers—have been made scapegoats. None of the real war criminals has been prosecuted.

Kokkuthodduwai is not the first mass grave discovered since the end of the war. A report issued in June by the JDS and other international organisations entitled *Mass graves and failed exhumations in Sri Lanka* establishes that around 20 mass graves have been discovered and “partially exhumed to date.”

It states: “None of Sri Lanka’s numerous Commissions of Inquiry were mandated to look into mass graves. Instead, efforts to uncover the truth have been stymied. Magistrates and forensic experts have been transferred abruptly. Police have delayed carrying out judicial orders, families’ lawyers have been denied access to sites, no efforts have been made to find living witnesses, no ante mortem data was collected and in the very rare cases where someone was convicted, they were then pardoned.”

An annex to report titled “Mass Grave Information” provides detailed descriptions of the 20 mass graves so far discovered, the majority in the war-torn North and East.

A mass grave found near Mannar in the Northern Province in 2018, contained the skeletal remains of 136 individuals. Local residents said that it could date back to 1990 when the government re-escalated the war, following a brief truce with the LTTE.

Another mass grave was found in 2013 in Matale, in the Central Highlands and about 150 kilometres from Colombo. It contained hundreds of bodies at what was believed to be a burial site for some of the tens of thousands of rural youth massacred under the UNP government of President R. Premadasa between 1988 and 1990.

These sites were only excavated after political pressure was exerted on the respective Colombo governments. The investigations have been limited in order to protect the ruling elite and those sections of the Sri Lankan state apparatus responsible.

According to the UN, 40,000 Tamils were killed during the final months of the war against the LTTE. While thousands of Tamils, including LTTE fighters, surrendered to the Sri Lankan army in front of their relatives and civilians. Their relatives are still protesting to demand information about what happened to their loved ones.

While Sinhala racists and capitalist political parties in Sri Lanka’s South have kept their mouths shut about these mass graves, their Tamil counterparts respond by demanding intervention by the “international community”—i.e., the US and other imperialist powers.

The communalist war carried out by successive Colombo governments was fully supported by US and other imperialists. It was only after its bloody end in 2009, that these imperialist powers began talking about war crimes, as a means of exerting pressure on Colombo to integrate it into their military-strategic offensive against China.

In appealing to these powers, the Tamil bourgeois parties are offering their support for the US war drive against China, in order to secure international backing for a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo and guarantee privileges for the Tamil elite.

While it is 14 years since the end of war, the relatives of those whose loved ones were “disappeared” in the North and East of Sri Lanka have engaged in constant protests to demand the whereabouts of their relatives.

Justice must be delivered for these people who need to know the truth of what happened to their children, husbands and relatives. No Sri Lankan capitalist political party—Sinhala or Tamil—is interested in uncovering the truth because they all have blood on their hands.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact