

# Sri Lankan army suspected over death of Tamil man in Mullaitivu

Vimal Rasenthiran  
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Last Friday evening, the body of 32-year-old Ethirmanasingham Kapilraj, a married man, was found floating in an irrigation tank (reservoir) at Muthaiyankattu village in the northern Mullaitivu district. His body bore scars and injuries, indicating that he had been brutally beaten.

Relatives and an eyewitness told the media that he had been captured and beaten by soldiers from the 63rd Division camp of the Sri Lanka Army in Muthaiyankattu.

This village is in the northern Vanni area, which was devastated during the final battles of the Sri Lankan military's 26-year communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. The occupying military maintains a large army camp near the Muthaiyankattu tank.

Kapilraj was among several young people who occasionally worked at the camp, sometimes receiving wages for jobs carried out there.

According to reports, five youths from the village were lured by some army soldiers to the camp on Friday evening with claims that they could collect and remove scrap metal from the site, which was being dismantled.

After entering the camp, the young men were surrounded by soldiers, who accused them of theft and began beating them with wooden and metal poles. Four of them managed to escape.

One youth, who was hospitalised with his injuries, told the media: "They grabbed me and hit me aggressively. They hit me on the back with a metal stick, and with their hands over my face, my chin, and also on my legs." He managed to flee.

Another witness said he saw soldiers grabbing Kapilraj and beating him severely.

When he did not return home, villagers searched for

him throughout the night and returned to the army camp. The camp commander reportedly said that one man had jumped into the tank and suggested that searchers look for him there. Kapilraj's body was recovered from the Muthaiyankattu tank the next day.

Kapilraj's brother, sister and father told the media that he had been living in Muthaiyankattu for the past two years, following his marriage. His house was near the army camp. When he and other villagers went fishing in the Muthaiyankattu tank for their livelihood, army personnel would sometimes cause problems—destroying boats and fishing nets and using abusive language, especially when drunk.

Kapilraj's brother said the family reported Friday's incident to the area police station in Oddusuddan, six kilometres away, but no officers came and no action was taken. They then informed the International Committee of the Red Cross office in Vavuniya, which in turn notified the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission in Colombo.

"Police came only after that. Villagers told us the police had gone to the bottom of the pond at midnight," the victim's brother said.

The police—amid rising local anger over the incident, including residents gathering outside the army camp—eventually arrested three soldiers.

A police media statement issued on August 11 said one soldier was arrested on suspicion of beating a youth, and two others were arrested for allegedly helping individuals to steal scrap metal from the premises. The police statement appears to be an attempt to frame the incident as a response to theft.

When the arrested soldiers were brought before the Mullaitivu courts on August 9, the magistrate ordered them to be held in remand until August 19. The postmortem of Kapilraj was conducted at the Jaffna

Teaching Hospital, where the judicial medical officer returned an open verdict—meaning further investigation is required to determine the cause of death.

The Sri Lankan military and police are notorious for such atrocities, particularly in the Northern and Eastern provinces, which have been under military occupation for nearly four decades. Arrests of young people, along with torture and killings, are frequently reported in these areas.

Even though the war ended in May 2009, over 100,000 army, navy and air force personnel remain stationed in large camps, with police and military intelligence units maintaining constant surveillance over the population.

Residents fear that, as in the past, no one will be prosecuted over Kapilraj's killing.

This young man's death occurred amid growing anger—not only among Tamils in the North and East but also across the country and internationally—following the discovery earlier this year of a mass grave at Chemmani Cemetery on the outskirts of Jaffna, the capital of the Northern Province. Numerous skeletons, including those of women, children and infants, have been uncovered so far.

These are believed to be the remains of Tamil civilians who were tortured and killed during the civil war, many of whom “disappeared” during military operations in Jaffna in 1996. Several other mass graves have also been discovered in the Northern and Eastern provinces.

Amid mounting anger, the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), the main Tamil nationalist party, has called for a hartal—a total shutdown—in the North and East this Friday. Other Tamil parties have expressed support for the action.

ITAK President C. Sivagnanam and ITAK Secretary M. Sumanthiran, who is also a parliamentarian, sent a letter to President Dissanayake urging him to “ensure an unhindered, thorough investigation and for the culprits to be brought to book.”

Noting the “oppressive conduct and excessive presence of the military in the North and the East,” the letter urged Dissanayake “to take immediate steps to remove the excessive presence of the military without delay.”

However, this call for the removal of the “excessive presence” of the military is cynical. The Sri Lankan

military has been deployed in these provinces to enforce the authority of the anti-democratic, Sinhala-majoritarian unitary state over the country's Tamil minority.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have, for decades, instigated communalist policies to divide the working class along ethnic lines, suppress dissent and defend bourgeois rule.

For their part, the Tamil parties—including ITAK—have fuelled Tamil nationalism, thereby conniving with Colombo's divisive policies, while seeking devolution of power to the North and East to share in capitalist rule and to exploit the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, consistently opposed the communal war and demanded the withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the North and East. They have also called for the internationalist unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in the fight for socialist policies.



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