

Sri Lankan government defends army massacre

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The death toll from last weekend's shelling has continued to rise as news has filtered out of the extent of the Sri Lankan military's criminal assault on the so-called no-fire zone in the North of the island. At least 50,000 civilians are trapped within the remaining few square kilometres of territory still held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Government doctor V. Shanmugarajah, who works at a makeshift hospital inside the zone, told the Associated Press yesterday that 430 civilians, including 106 children, had been brought for burial or died at the facility after heavy shelling Saturday and Sunday. He estimated more than 1,300 wounded civilians had been brought to the hospital for treatment.

Dr Shanmugarajah told the newsagency that the death toll was likely to have been far higher because many of those killed would have been buried in the bunkers where they died. He explained that a male nurse and his family had died when the trench in which they were sheltering caved in.

"There were many who died without medical treatment," the doctor said. "Seeing the number of wounded, and from what people tell me, I estimate the death toll to be around 1,000." Many of the dead were buried in mass graves near the hospital. Shanmugarajah told the Guardian that apart from artillery barrages, an air force jet pounded the area. The newspaper reported that medical staff had released photos of the carnage.

The UN spokesman in Colombo, Gordon Weiss, yesterday branded the attack a bloodbath. "The UN has consistently warned against the bloodbath scenario as we've watched the steady increase in civilian deaths over the last few months. The large-scale killing of civilians over the weekend, including the deaths of more than 100 children, shows that that bloodbath has become a reality," he said.

Pointing to the large number of injured, Weiss warned: "Many of those civilians may die in the coming days because we cannot reach them with medical care." Medical staff at the makeshift hospital are working under terrible conditions, including a lack of basic medicines. The Colombo government and the military have refused to allow adequate supplies of food and medicine inside the "no-fire zone".

Government spokesmen in Colombo have flatly denied the army's responsibility for the massacre, but their claims are simply not credible. Speaking to the Island yesterday, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse—the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse—dismissed the deaths as an LTTE "propaganda lie" timed to coincide with an informal UN Security Council session and to "force the international community to stop the offensive".

Rajapakse told the newspaper that “nothing could be as ridiculous as a claim of over 2,000 civilians being killed in a single barrage”—which is not what Shanmugarajah had described. What is ridiculous are the repeated claims by government and military spokesmen not to have used heavy weapons in their continuing offensive, and their attempt to blame all casualties on the LTTE’s use of civilians as “human shields”.

As the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) pointed out last week: “Under the laws of war, parties to a conflict must take all feasible precautions to ensure that a target of attack is a military objective and not a civilian object. Attacks that do not discriminate between military targets and civilian objects are prohibited. Individuals who order or carry out unlawful attacks wilfully—that is, deliberately or recklessly—are responsible for war crimes.”

The associated HRW report catalogued 30 separate attacks on known hospitals since December as evidence of war crimes. “The government cannot hide behind LTTE atrocities to justify their own unlawful acts,” HRW Asia director Brad Adams said.

A government statement also attacked the credibility of Dr Shanmugarajah, claiming that his comments were being vetted by the LTTE. “Giving credence and acceptance to this LTTE-inspired piece of ‘news’, would wittingly or unwittingly aid the terrorist organisation to save itself at the hour of its impending demise,” it declared.

In recent weeks, the government has simply dismissed in a similar fashion any news of the army’s atrocities, whether from doctors inside the “no-fire zone,” aid workers, human rights groups, the International Committee of the Red Cross or the UN. All have been accused, without any substantiation, of being pro-LTTE and all calls for a ceasefire have been denounced either by the government or its Sinhala chauvinist allies as “aiding terrorism”.

Tellingly, the government and the military refuse to allow independent reporters near the frontline and have placed heavy restrictions on aid workers. Under these circumstances, the doctors in the no-fire zone are one of the only sources of information. “To the best of our knowledge, the government doctors trapped with these civilians have proven consistently reliable,” UN spokesman Weiss explained.

The credibility of these sources contrasts with the Rajapakse government’s own propaganda, which time and again has proven to be based on outright lies. Facing international pressure, the government demarcated a “no-fire zone” inside LTTE-controlled territory on February 12, promising that civilians who moved there would be safe.

When reports emerged of shelling and aerial bombing inside the zone, the military denied any involvement. When UN satellite photos were leaked showing bomb craters, Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona admitted that the army had shelled the area, but dismissed claims of any civilian casualties. The military later contradicted Kohona, claiming the photos were not conclusive evidence of shelling.

Late last month, facing international pressure, President Rajapakse announced the end of combat operations and the use of heavy weapons in the no-fire zone—in effect acknowledging that its previous denials were false. Within 24 hours, however, the army shelled a hospital in the area. In another cynical move last Thursday, the military announced that it was redrawing the boundaries of the no-fire zone. But that did not save the more than 400 people killed over the weekend inside the re-demarcated safe area.

The criminal indifference of the government and the army to the fate of tens of thousands of civilians demonstrates the communal character of the war—all Tamils are regarded as the enemy. Far from being a “war on terrorism,” President Mahinda Rajapakse is waging a war to entrench the power and privileges of the island’s Sinhala elites.

The weekend’s atrocities are part of the army’s preparation for a final drive against the remnants of the LTTE’s fighting force. Defence Secretary Rajapakse told the Island: “We are in the final stage of our offensive and there is absolutely no way the Tigers can get out of this trap”. He declared there would be a major breakthrough within the next 48 hours.

Lakbimanews reported on Sunday that “the final assault on the LTTE will begin this week with army commandos and Special Forces soldiers being used.” The newspaper quoted an un-named senior military official as saying that the army intended to “carry out air attacks and use heavy weapons” targetting LTTE bunkers that could be the hiding place of LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran.

Calls by the US, Britain, France and Austria for a formal UN Security Council discussion on the situation in Sri Lanka were blocked yesterday by China, Russia and Japan, which insisted that the war was an internal matter.

Britain, the US and France have all called for an immediate ceasefire. However, their expressions of concern about civilian lives are completely hypocritical. The US military is currently using lies and obfuscations very similar to those of Colombo to deny responsibility for the death of more than 120 deaths in Afghanistan in a recent US air raid. All three countries backed Rajapakse’s resumption of war in mid-2006 and have remained all but silent on his government’s abuse of democratic rights and flagrant breaches of the 2002 ceasefire.

The manoeuvring in the UN Security Council by the various powers is aimed at securing political influence in Colombo following the destruction of the LTTE as a regular fighting force. The US and its allies are pressuring the Rajapakse government to implement their demands for a “political solution” to the war out of concern that instability in Sri Lanka will spill over into India. China and Russia have assisted the Rajapakse government by blocking a formal UN debate, hoping to boost their standing in any post-war arrangements.

The LTTE continues to issue futile appeals to the “international community” to press the Sri Lankan government for a ceasefire. These calls are in line with its program of a separate capitalist state of Eelam in the North and East of the island, which always depended on the backing of one of more of the major powers. Its appeals have been answered by a UN demand that it unconditionally surrender—in other words, support for Rajapakse and his war.

In Colombo, the entire political and media establishment has lined up behind Rajapakse’s war. The main opposition parties—the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have remained silent on the weekend massacre of Tamil civilians.

Both opposition parties have attempted to attack the government for paying too much attention to international criticism. The JVP seized on the government’s announced “end of combat operations” to claim that it had accepted demands for a ceasefire—even though that was patently false. A senior UNP MP, Ranga Bandara, told the Island on May 4 that

there should be no restrictions on the use of heavy weapons and that army commanders should have the right to use armour and artillery freely.

All these parties are mired in the anti-Tamil communal politics that has been exploited by the Colombo ruling elites since independence in 1948 to divide working people and prop up bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka. The JVP and UNP, along with all of the parties of Rajapakse's ruling coalition, have fully backed the war and also bear responsibility for the war crimes currently being carried out.

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