

Hundreds of dead civilians piling up in Sri Lanka war

Hundreds of Tamil civilians, including children, have been killed and wounded in Sri Lanka's war against the Tamil Tigers, international relief agencies say, with some calling it a humanitarian crisis.

Although Sri Lanka insists that civilian deaths have been nil or minimal, there is growing disquiet in world capitals. Even the usually reticent international aid agencies are starting to speak out about the killings but opinion is divided as to who is more to blame: Colombo or the LTTE.

Almost all the deaths and injuries are reported from Mullaitivu district, where the military has cornered the bulk of the guerrillas in a partly forested 300 sq km area that is also packed with civilians whose estimates range from 150,000 to 250,000.

Colombo alleges that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is forcibly holding on to the civilians as a human shield and that its fighters fire from crowded places, leading to retaliatory action. But Tamils, including those opposed to the LTTE, allege the military is deliberately targeting the Tamil community.

Many of the civilian dead do not belong to Muallaitivu but had moved into the region following earlier fighting in neighbouring Kilinochchi.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said Wednesday that hundreds had been killed after being caught in the fighting between the military and the LTTE. Scores of wounded were crowding understaffed and ill-equipped medical facilities, the ICRC said.

'People are being caught in the crossfire, hospitals and ambulances have been hit by shelling and several aid workers were injured while evacuating the wounded,' said the ICRC, which has worked in Sri Lanka for years.

Some Tamil sources said that in the hurry to wrap up the final phase of the war, the military was forging ahead unmindful of the Tamil civilians caught up in the war.

Informed non-Tamil sources in Colombo who did not want to be identified in any manner told IANS that the situation was precarious.

'It is a very dire situation,' said one source with access to the Sri Lankan establishment. 'Food is running out in LTTE territory and there is no water either. The wounded are piling up in hospitals, which are running short of supplies.'

The United Nations, which has two representatives in the war zone, is desperately trying to evacuate the seriously wounded, including 50 children, but says it faces hurdles from both the military and the LTTE.

A statement purportedly issued by the Regional Director of Health Services in the town of Mullaitivu, which the military has seized, said that heavy fighting and artillery shelling had led to over 300 deaths and 1,000 injuries in the areas of Suthanthirapuram, Udaiyaarkaddu and Vallipuram. Colombo denounced the statement as a hoax.

Another non-Tamil source reported that at least 160 Tamil civilians had been killed in just three days: Jan 25 (55), Jan 26 (60) and Jan 27 (45).

It was the on Jan 27, or Tuesday, night that Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee made a hurried trip to Sri Lanka saying India was concerned over the plight of civilians. President Mahinda Rajapaksa promised him that Colombo would do everything to 'minimise' civilian casualties.

One Tamil rights activist alleged that Colombo was uncaring because the dead were Tamils.

'The government does not care about Tamils who are dying,' the activist with wide contacts in Sri Lanka's northeast told IANS over telephone. 'People are getting killed even in so-called safe zones. But this is what the LTTE wants. It can then raise a storm in Tamil Nadu and other places.'

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