More evidence of army torture and murder dug up in northern Sri Lanka

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13 October 1999

Fourteen skeletons of Tamil youths, killed and buried by the Sri Lankan security forces, were found last September during the exhumation of graves at Chemmani, in the suburbs of Jaffna, in northern Sri Lanka. The skeletons are believed to have belonged to Tamil youths who disappeared after the army recaptured Jaffna during a renewed war drive against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) in 1995-96.

A convicted army corporal first revealed existence of the mass graves at a High Court hearing in Colombo in June 1998. But the Peoples Alliance (PA) government only reluctantly agreed in June this year to establish an inquiry into the allegations after continuous agitation by Tamils, especially the parents of disappeared youths.

During the first stage of the inquiry, on June 15 and 16, army corporal Somaratna Rajapaksha was taken to Jaffna to show the local magistrate and forensic experts where the bodies were buried. On August 30, Rajapaksha, along with four other ex-soldiers, was flown to Jaffna for the second phase. The exhumation began on September 6, after a three-day inquiry into the whereabouts of sites. The ex-soldiers had all been convicted of the rape and murder of a high school girl. They also killed the girl’s mother, younger brother and a relative. The soldiers said that they were eyewitnesses to other killings ordered by high-ranking military officers.

During the inquiry on August 30, Rajapaksha accused the government authorities of not fully investigating his claims. He told the magistrate that Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officials or the military police had failed to even record the names of high-ranking army officials, who, he claimed, were involved in the killings. He also said that he had seen signs of tampering with the gravesites.

Rajapaksha also told the inquiry that he was concerned at the attempt by Colombo newspapers to smear and intimidate him. The July 18 edition of Sinhala weekly, Divaina, carried a headline: “Cat’s paw digs up Chemmani Graves”. “Rajapaksha’s fairy tales deceived only the Tamils of Jaffna,” the newspaper declared. His evidence “provided a good weapon for the Tigers who stood behind them. It is the cat’s paws of the Tigers that stampeded the international organizations. Right throughout, the Tiger organisation has schemed to discredit the defence forces and slander the state,” it added.

On September 1, Rajapaksha was to accompany the other ex-soldiers to the gravesites but he refused. He complained to the magistrate that he was being denied legal aid and being questioned by the state counsel and CID with the aim of incriminating him in the murders. He agreed to participate only after the magistrate warned the state counsel. On the third and final day, after locating more gravesites, Rajapaksha asked the magistrate to provide him with legal aid, when questioned by CID officials, and also security for himself and his family.

Ex-soldiers called as witnesses pointed out 25 sites, provided descriptions of the youths killed, and took the magistrate to some of their homes. They said that army officers and soldiers had used trucks to transport the youths—some of whom were still alive—to the gravesites. Many of the victims were naked or in their underwear. The living were killed and all the bodies then buried. The ex-soldiers were flown back to Colombo at the end of the three-day inquiry and were not present when the exhumations began on September 6. Neither were the media, who had been permitted to observe the earlier excavations.
On the same day, P. Selvarajah, president of the
Union of Parents of Disappeared Children (UPDC),
who had visited the gravesites to witness the
exhumations was arrested. The pretext was that a
grenade had been found near his home. He was taken to
regiment 512 and questioned for hours. He was only
released after the UPDC, human rights organisations in
Jaffna and the magistrate himself protested against the
arrest describing it as an attempt to intimidate
witnesses and those sympathetic to the investigation.

Only one of the sites identified by Rajapaksha, a
ditch 15 feet square and 6 feet deep, west of road off
Jaffna-Kandy highway was excavated on September 6.
Rajapaksha said 15 bodies were buried at Chemmani
junction. On September 7 a caterpillar machine dug up
parts from two skeletons; the next day, a skull and
some bones were found; and on September 9 three
skeletons were dug up.

Professor Chandrasiri Niriella, a forensic scientist,
said that one of the skeletons was a woman. A nose
stud of the type worn by Tamil women, fragments of
hair, a hair pin, a blue underskirt, a man's suspender
and other material were found near the three skeletons.
Rajapaksha had previously explained that a couple,
whose skulls were smashed with clubs, was buried at
the location.

Professor Niriella concluded that blunt weapons had
fractured the skulls. The female skeleton is suspected to
be that of a woman who was arrested at Ariyalai while
watching TV with her husband. The magistrate has
ordered that a resident of the house be summoned to
help identify the remains.

Further exhumations were carried out on September
13, near the Chemmani salterns. Rajapaksha, who
pointed out this site, said that 30 Tamil youth from
Achchuveli and Kaithadi were buried there. They had
been arrested by the military, brought to the Ariyalai
torture camp on a tractor, tortured and then struck
down with iron bars and spades. Excavations were
halted in this area after it was reported that no skeletons
or other evidence had been found.

Another soldier, private M. Jayatilake reported
another location where around 50 murdered Tamil
youth were alleged to have been buried. Jayatilake said
that he and several other soldiers had been ordered by
Lieutenant Tudugala, Captain Lafir and Captain Nasser
to bury the bodies.

The Union of Parents of Disappeared Children
(UPDC) are concerned that the lengthy delay in starting
the investigation has allowed the Sri Lankan security
forces time to cover up their crimes. It pointed out that
local residents witnessed columns of smoke rising from
the Chemmani area in September last year.

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