

# Sri Lankan government justifies the massacre of school students

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The Sri Lankan government has responded to mounting evidence that the air force slaughtered scores of school children in an attack in the Mullaitivu district on Monday with more lies and a justification for further war crimes.

After warplanes strafed the former orphanage early on Monday morning, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) announced that 61 students, mainly girls, had been killed in the attack and 129 injured. The students from schools in the surrounding area had been sleeping overnight in the buildings at Vallipunam in LTTE-held territory while participating in a two-day first aid course.

The military immediately denied the claims, declaring that the air force had strafed an LTTE training camp and killed LTTE fighters. However, on the same day, Ulf Henricsson, the head of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), said his team had visited the area and confirmed that the dead were teenage school children. He declared that they had seen no military installations or weapons.

Staff from a nearby United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) office immediately rushed to the bombed compound to assess the situation and to provide fuel, medical supplies and counselling. In a statement on Tuesday, UNICEF said that as many as 40 adolescent girls had been killed and 100 children injured, some critically. UNICEF representative Joanna van Gerten told the media: "At this time, we don't have any evidence they are LTTE cadres."

Anxious to quell mounting outrage, government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella held a press conference in Colombo on Tuesday. Without expressing the slightest sympathy for the victims or their parents, Rambukwella, who is also a government minister, repeated the claim that the former orphanage was being used as an LTTE training camp, adding that children trained at the facility had been involved in recent attacks on the Sri Lankan armed forces at Muhamalai over last weekend.

Neither Rambukwella, nor military spokesman Brigadier Athula Jayawardena, offered the slightest proof for their claims. The assembled journalists were shown aerial photographs of the site before and after the bombing. The Japanese *Kyodo* website commented: "[F]ilm shot after the strike showed indistinguishable figures running. Government spokesmen described them as Tiger cadres."

Brigadier Jayawardena told the media that "the camp that was hit is a jungle area with a firing range". The military, he said, had monitored the area for years and had only attacked the site after weeks of gathering intelligence, including from spies, and analysing the target. He did not bother to address the evidence provided by representatives of the SLMM and UNICEF, nor, if the intelligence was so accurate, to explain why the military deliberately killed school children.

Moreover, in his rush to demonstrate the precision of the defence intelligence, the brigadier inadvertently confirmed that the military had been planning its attacks against the LTTE for weeks, if not longer—that is, well before fighting anywhere near the “training camp”. From the outset, the government has claimed its offensive against the LTTE, launched on July 26, was a “limited, humanitarian” operation to open the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate and provide water for farmers. In reality, the military already had plans for a far wider war to attack other LTTE targets, including the Vallipunam orphanage.

The most chilling comments, however, came from the minister, who launched into a tirade against the LTTE for recruiting child soldiers. “Once trained with arms one cannot consider them as normal children,” Rambukwella declared. “If a child comes with a gun to shoot a soldier you cannot expect them to just stand there and hug him. At a time like this we cannot look at their age but instead what they were aiming to do.”

To make the obvious point, none of the girls cold-bloodedly massacred on Monday were attacking Sri Lankan troops. Nor is there any evidence that the students were undergoing military training. Stripped to its bare bones, Rambukwella’s argument runs as follows: the LTTE trains child soldiers, the Vallipunam orphanage contained children, therefore it was a legitimate target. In other words, the entire population—children, as well as men and women—is being treated as the enemy.

It is the same logic as employed by the Israeli government to justify its war crimes in southern Lebanon. On the basis of destroying “Hezbollah infrastructure”, the military levelled villages, towns and cities, killing hundreds of civilians. After bombing the town of Qana, killing at least 28 people including children, Israeli authorities continued to maintain that the building was used by Hezbollah to fire rockets, despite all evidence to the contrary by journalists and aid workers.

The Sri Lankan military may lack the firepower of the Israeli war machine, but the methods are the same: indiscriminate artillery and air attacks on alleged LTTE targets in order to intimidate and terrorise the population as a whole. After the LTTE entered the eastern town of Muttur in early August, threatening to cut army supply lines to the Mavilaru area, the military responded with a devastating barrage of rocket and artillery fire, killing civilians and forcing between 30,000 to 40,000 residents to flee.

Rambukwella’s response to UNICEF’s evidence was to cite a previous UNICEF report accusing the LTTE of recruiting child soldiers. “UNICEF can’t tell us they [the victims] are children and not to attack them,” he said, absurdly adding that if the SLMM and UNICEF had any doubts, the government would take them to the area. Quite apart from the fact that the government is currently in no position to take anyone into LTTE territory, SLMM and UNICEF representatives have already visited the site and delivered their verdict.

The atrocity has not only exposed the criminal character of the government, but the slavish support of the Colombo media for its war. The right-wing press openly acts as the mouthpiece for the government and the military, uncritically republishing their lies and ritually denouncing the LTTE as “Tiger terrorists”. The *Island* declared yesterday, “Government dismisses SLMM claim on Mullaitivu bombing”. The *Lakbima* newspaper reported the incident as “Air attack on camp training the child soldiers”.

The *Daily Mirror*, which attempts to posture as a liberal alternative, published an article on Tuesday entitled “Mystery surrounds death of over 60 youth in Mullaitivu”, reporting unsubstantiated speculation that those killed were “child soldiers”. Even after the UNICEF statement was released, the newspaper failed to take a stance, with an article yesterday declaring “Children killing under UNICEF-Govt crossfire”. None of the media has attempted to make an independent assessment of the massacre.

Even the limited reportage of comments from the LTTE as well as organisations such as UNICEF has prompted the government to threaten to impose censorship measures. The *Daily Mirror* reported that President Mahinda Rajapakse has met with the heads of private and state media to brief them on plans for “introducing guidelines to all media organisations.” The proposal came in the wake of a security meeting last month at which senior armed forces commanders complained to Rajapakse about “LTTE disinformation” in the press coverage.

No one in the Colombo political and media establishment has called the Mullaitivu bombing by its right name: a war crime for which those responsible in the government and the military should be charged and prosecuted.