

# The Guardian

## Trapped Sri Lankans 'dying in makeshift hospital'

**Doctors treating refugees injured in intense fighting plead for evacuations and medical aid**

**Gethin Chamberlain** *in Delhi*

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Doctors say wounded Sri Lankan civilians are dying for want of proper medical treatment as they lie trapped in a makeshift hospital in the last rebel-held pocket in the north-east of the island.

This weekend, hundreds of injured civilians poured in to the improvised medical facility in Putumattalan village, which has been repeatedly targeted by artillery. Earlier in the week 16 patients were killed in shelling.

Both government forces and Tamil Tiger separatists have been accused of war crimes during the conflict, although confirmation is impossible because independent journalists are banned from the conflict zone. Yesterday the Sri Lankan military said a suspected Tamil Tiger threw a grenade into a bus carrying civilians trying to escape, killing one woman and injuring another 13 people.

The Tamil Tigers are fighting a desperate rearguard action in the face of an overwhelming onslaught by the army. Last night a Sri Lankan military spokesman said the only options left to those fighters cornered in a 142-square-mile pocket was surrender or suicide. "We don't mind if they are captured or swallow cyanide. They have been a cancer to this country and they must suffer," Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara told the Observer.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, which has a medical team in Putumattalan, has urged both sides to allow the injured out and humanitarian aid in. Spokeswoman Sophie Romanens said patients were being treated in a school and a community centre. "What our people are saying is that people injured by the fighting are coming in by the dozen every day," she said. "There are no more working medical facilities there, just a few makeshift points."

About 600 people, including three mothers with newborn babies, were able to leave the hospital in two evacuations last Tuesday and Thursday, but more sick and wounded are arriving every day in the hope of also being evacuated.

"People are still being injured by the fighting and they just can't get the medical treatment that they need there. It is not a hospital," Romanens said. "For them, it is a matter of life and death."

She said a number of patients had died as a result of injuries that could not be treated with the facilities available. At least five died within days of the patients being moved from the main hospital, which had to be abandoned on safety grounds, she said.

Doctors working at the makeshift hospital say it has been repeatedly targeted by artillery. "They say shelling is coming close and there are some patients dead because the place was hit by shells on Monday," said Romanens.

On Friday Thurairajah Varatharajah, a doctor at the makeshift hospital, said about 40 people caught in the conflict zone were being killed every day and scores more were being injured. He claimed that staff were struggling with a shortage of medicines.

The government claims the Tamil Tigers are preventing civilians from leaving the conflict zone and attacking those who do try to get out. It disputes the widely quoted figure of 200,000 trapped civilians, claiming that there are now fewer than 80,000 people caught up in the violence.

Many of those who have escaped have been housed in temporary camps that human rights groups claim are little better than prisons. There are also plans to set up larger "welfare villages", with restrictions on the movements of those living there. But Sri Lanka has angrily dismissed criticism of the camps. "We have no concentration camps: we have accommodation in schools and abandoned buildings," said Nanayakkara. "They have barbed wire around them for the safety of the civilians. If the [Tamil Tigers] lob a hand grenade, a lot of people will be killed and we are responsible for their safety."

Unicef said it was providing assistance to 30,000 people who had fled the fighting. Spokeswoman Sarah Crowe said many were children who had been displaced as many as 10 times in the space of a year. "Their situation deteriorated even further in the past two months as they were increasingly caught in the crossfire, were in dire need of basic services, and have seen a level of violence that no child should ever witness," she said.

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