

# The Guardian

## Fears grow for safety of doctors who reported civilian slaughter

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Fears are growing for the safety of the doctors who acted as the eyes and ears of the world during the Sri Lankan army's final assault on the Tamil Tigers's last stronghold in the north-east of the country.

Doctors Thangamutha Sathiyamoorthy, Thurairaja Varatharajah and V Shanmugarajah, and London-trained administrative officer Vany Kumar, are understood to have been detained by Sri Lankan forces as they tried to escape the fighting on Friday. They have not been heard from since. The Sri Lankan army denies involvement in their disappearance.

The medical staff had provided a running commentary on the slaughter of thousands of civilians trapped inside the so-called "no-fire zone" while the world's media has been shut out of it.

But their reports - carried in the Guardian and the Observer, among other news outlets - have enraged the government in Colombo, which has dismissed them as pawns of the Tamil Tigers.

Last month the health minister, Athula Kahandaliyanage, accused the two most outspoken doctors, Sathiyamoorthy and Varatharajah, of "mouthing the propaganda of the LTTE" and the government has warned that they would face disciplinary action over their allegations that Sri Lankan forces had been shelling civilians.

On Friday, Varatharajah said the medical staff had been forced to abandon the last of the makeshift hospitals still functioning inside the no-fire zone to take cover in a bunker as the fighting intensified around them.

According to UN sources, they later attempted to escape from the area through the Omanthai crossing point and had not been seen since.

UN spokesman Gordon Weiss said: "We believe the doctors came out and we are concerned for their well-being. We are now trying to discover their whereabouts."

A UN official, who declined to be named, said it was hoped that foreign governments would bring pressure to bear on the government in Colombo.

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