

The Guardian

Sri Lanka says up to 5,000 civilians died in Tigers battle

Julian Borger

Thu 4 Jun 2009 16.19 EDT

A senior Sri Lankan official today estimated the civilian death toll from the last stages of the war with the Tamil Tigers as 3,000 to 5,000 and defended the use of mortars in a government-designated "no-fire zone".

Rajiva Wijesinha, permanent secretary in Sri Lanka's ministry of disaster management and human rights, rejected reports that 20,000 civilians were killed as the army overran the Tigers. He also rejected an unpublished UN report that 7,000 people had been killed by the end of April.

"I would estimate it altogether at 3,000 to 5,000," Wijesinha said in an interview with the Guardian, attributing the deaths to the Tigers' use of refugees as human shields. "The Tigers had prepared this hostage situation and the figures went up very badly," he said, adding that the UN figures had not officially been made public because they had not been verified. "These UN figures I'm afraid are not worth the emphasis that is placed on them."

Sri Lanka has been accused by the UN and western governments of using heavy weapons against a "no-fire zone" it had designated for civilians caught up in the last stages of the conflict on a narrow coastal strip in the north-east of the island.

Wijesinha said: "I asked the army and they said 'we said we're not using heavy weaponry' but that does not preclude what they describe as 81mm mortars, an infantry weapon. "They were using infantry operations, and never said they were not, in order to get the civilians free."

Wijesinha said the mortars were being used against Tamil Tiger heavy weapons, including tanks, which he said were firing on refugees attempting to flee.

Commenting on his explanation, a British official said there was no agreed definition of a heavy weapon, but added: "Towards the end of the conflict the civilians were crammed into such a confined space any such weaponry would have a devastating effect."

Brad Adams, the Asia director of Human Rights Watch, said: "The government told people to go to the no-fire zone. They were packed into a small area. Then they fired on them, with 81mm mortars and other weapons. And they denied again and again they were using these weapons ... there is very strong evidence that they did commit war crimes."

The source for many of the early reports of civilian casualties was a handful of government

doctors in the war zone, who described the scene at makeshift clinics to the international media as the army offensive unfolded. They have since been detained by the Sri Lankan government and there is confusion over their fate. Adams claimed they were being held to prevent information about war crimes getting out.

Wijesinha said he hoped the doctors, who include two hospital directors, would be released "fairly soon", arguing they had been forced to give harrowing accounts of civilian suffering by the Tamil Tigers.

"I think the doctors were under a lot of stress and they behaved as most people would in such circumstances. We don't hold it against them at all," he said.

But he added: "They are being questioned to find out exactly what happened. I don't think we need to let them out immediately just because the press wants to come and get them."

But the human rights minister, Mahinda Samarasinghe, told the BBC the doctors were being detained on "reasonable suspicion of collaboration with the LTTE [Tamil Tigers]".

Topics

- Sri Lanka
- United Nations
- Human rights
- South and Central Asia
- news