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Sri Lanka rejects UN execution video claims

Minister rejects footage aired by Channel 4 as a fraud Fresh calls for investigation into possible war crimes



Ethnic Tamil civilians try to escape the conflict. Sri Lanka has rejected the UN's assertion that an execution video is probably real. Photograph: Handout/Sri Lankan army

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Sri Lanka today accused UN experts of bias after they concluded that a video apparently showing the summary executions of Tamil prisoners was authentic.

Philip Alston, a UN human rights investigator, said the footage was probably real and called for a war crimes inquiry into possible abuses in the final stages of the war between the government and Tamil rebels, which ended in May.

"We don't accept his conclusions, and we believe [they] are highly subjective and biased," Sri Lanka's human rights minister, Mahinda Samarasinghe, said. "We believe he is on a crusade ... to force a war crimes inquiry against Sri Lanka."

Channel 4 aired a video last year that it said showed government troops killing unarmed, naked, bound and blindfolded men during the army's final assault on the Tamil Tigers. The Sri Lankan government immediately rejected it as a fraud perpetrated by Tamil Tiger supporters and said its own investigation, using Sri Lankan civilian and military experts, had found it was doctored.

The footage was shot by a Sri Lankan soldier in January 2009 using a mobile phone, according to Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka, the campaign group that passed it on to Channel 4. Alston, the UN Human Rights Council's investigator on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, said reports by three US-based independent experts on forensic pathology, video analysis and firearm evidence "strongly suggest the video is authentic".

The US state department and human rights groups have accused Sri Lanka's government and the rebels of war crimes against civilians during the final months of fighting, when government forces crushed the Tamil Tigers and ended the conflict.

Rupert Colville, spokesman for the UN high commissioner for human rights, Navi Pillay, said in Geneva on Friday today that Alston's report added to a series of troubling allegations regarding the conduct of the war.

"A full and impartial investigation is critical if we are to confront the very big question marks that hang over this war," he said. "Obviously if the Sri Lankan armed forces and the Sri Lankan government has done nothing wrong, it will have nothing to fear from an international investigation."

Sri Lanka has repeatedly rejected calls for international investigations into its conduct during the fighting as an infringement of its sovereignty.

Some 80,000 to 100,000 people were killed during the 25-year war in Sri Lanka, according to UN reports, with more than 7,000 civilians killed in the last months of the conflict.

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