

The Guardian

Channel 4 to air 'horrific' Sri Lanka footage

Investigation fronted by Jon Snow to include mobile phone films that appear to show war crimes



Jon Snow is to front Channel 4's investigation into alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

Tara Conlan

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Channel 4 is to air "probably the most horrific" footage it has ever shown in an investigation into alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka.

A day after UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon announced he is considering whether to investigate "credible allegations" that Sri Lankan forces committed war crimes in the closing weeks of the civil war in 2009, Channel 4 has revealed it will screen what it calls "harrowing and dramatic footage" which appears to document atrocities being carried out.

Because of the horrific nature of the videos, the film, presented by Jon Snow, will air in a late night slot in May and C4 said that "distressing images will be preceded by appropriate warnings".

The investigation will examine films which Channel 4 said, "on the face of it, shows: extrajudicial executions filmed by Sri Lankan soldiers as war trophies on their phones; the aftermath of shelling in civilian camps and hospitals alleged to have been deliberately targeted by Sri Lankan government forces; dead female Tamil fighters who appear to have been systematically raped; and pictures which document Tamil fighters alive in the custody of Sri Lankan government forces and then later dead, apparently having been executed."

The film also acknowledges the atrocities alleged to have been carried out by the separatist Tamil Tigers.

According to Channel 4, the footage was captured on mobile phones by victims and by perpetrators keeping the images as so-called "war trophies".

The film's director, Callum Macrae, said: "The Sri Lankan government wanted a war without witness - deporting journalists and pressurising UN representatives to leave - but it didn't allow for the extraordinary power of mobile phone and satellite technology.

"We have trawled through hours of devastating imagery shot by Tamils under attack and Sri Lankan soldiers as war trophies. The claims made by eyewitnesses in the film appear to be illustrated in each case by video footage or still images."

Channel 4's head of news and current affairs, Dorothy Byrne, who commissioned the programme, said: "The footage is probably the most horrific the channel has ever shown. The decision to show it at length was made only after serious and careful consideration.

"This dossier of visual evidence of alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by forces of the government of Sri Lanka is of the greatest possible public interest. We believe that screening it is the only way to enable viewers to make their own informed judgments about what happened."

The film is being made by ITN Productions, edited by Gareth Williams and executive produced by ITN Productions editorial director Chris Shaw.

Channel 4 News has previously reported on the atrocities carried out by the Sri Lankan army on Tamils in the last months of the civil war.

In August 2009, it aired a video that appeared to show naked, bound men being executed with a shot to the back of the head.

The Sri Lankan government attempted to discredit the video and complained to Ofcom, while trying to keep its identity as the complainant from being disclosed.

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