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With truth about Sri Lankan war crimes emerging, we need a proper inquiry

The government denied shelling hospitals or stopping aid - but a UN report says all this happened before the war with Tamil Tigers ended in 2009

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Tamil women and girls who escaped a rebel-held area following fighting between Sri Lanka's army and Tamil Tigers queue for water in a refugee camp in the north of the country in February 2009. Photograph: Nir Elias/Reuters

Sri Lanka's response to the release of a UN panel report on the end of the civil war by three eminent international judicial experts has been entirely predictable.

After failing to stall its release altogether, the country's government has set about attacking it with its customary sledgehammer diplomacy.

Unlike Libya, the battlefields in Sri Lanka were sealed off to reporters, preventing them from covering the alleged war crimes as they happened. The government is similarly hoping to limit

coverage of the report.

But, in the words of a friend of mine who worked in the camps which filled with wounded, frightened and desperate civilians who managed to escape from the Tamil Tigers during those months of 2009: "We're learning now what we knew then."

During the final phase of the war between January and May 2009, the government consistently denied that its forces were using heavy weapons. We now learn through the UN report that government shells accounted for most civilian deaths.

In February 2009 the government denied that there were any more than 70,000 civilians left inside the siege zone, when we now know there were at least four times that figure.

It denied constantly that it was shelling hospitals or makeshift clinics where children wounded by its artillery were being stitched. We now know that there were dozens of criminal attacks that killed patients and staff.

It even denied that it was stopping aid shipments to the stricken, trapped population. We now know that many died needlessly for want of medical supplies and food.

Similarly, the government continues to this day to deny that its forces killed any civilians during the conflict. It has called the UN report biased and unfair, and methodologically unsound.

It says that the reopening of old wounds will spoil the process of reconciliation. It has asserted that the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, has no authority to examine allegations that the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers committed war crimes.

Explanations gush from the government, all except the one that matters: an admission of responsibility for what seems to have been one of the worst war crimes of recent history.

The UN panel says that the sheer proportion of the alleged crimes constitutes a "grave assault on the entire regime of international law".

The Tamil Tigers are held responsible for effectively holding hundreds of thousands of its own people as a buffer against government assault.

They evidently killed women and children who tried to escape, and forced other children into the front lines as fodder. However, those Tigers responsible are mostly dead, many of them apparently summarily executed when they tried to surrender.

So it is no wonder that the government of Sri Lanka is little interested in investigating war crimes.

Culpability for any alleged crimes would almost certainly stop at the doorstep of the small circle of people who surround the Rajapaksa family. President Mahinda Rajapaksa instituted a domestic inquiry (the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission) which, as the panel report notes, is a political sop.

The very clarity of this unambiguous UN report leaves a gaping challenge for a world that tries to define its relationships according to the rule of law.

Given Sri Lanka's record of determined obfuscation, the next step must be a fully constituted international criminal investigation into the events of 2009.

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