



## Sri Lankan security forces destroyed evidence of war crimes, report claims

**Public Interest Advocacy Centre investigated allegations of widespread human rights violations in final months of civil war**

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Accusations that Sri Lankan security forces destroyed evidence of mass civilian killings are among allegations of “flagrant and reckless” violations of human rights committed in the final months of the civil war, according to a new report.

The Public Interest Advocacy Centre (Piac) engaged leading experts on areas including criminal law, international criminal law, and forensics to investigate the multitude of serious allegations from the final months of Sri Lanka’s civil war in 2008-2009. It called for an independent, international inquiry as the only way to achieve full accountability, ahead of the March deadline for the Sri Lankan government to report back to the UN Human Rights Council.

“This report describes command and control structures so well-established that criminal responsibility for certain crimes if proven at trial could lead to convictions of senior military commanders and Sri Lankan government officials, as well as senior surviving members of the [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] LTTE,” it said.

The report, *Island of Impunity* by Piac's International Crimes Evidence Project (ICEP) found that government forces were behind the vast majority of alleged war crimes, and heard evidence that suggests the Sri Lankan government may have deliberately and systematically sought to exhume bodies from mass graves in a bid to hide evidence of the mass killings.

ICEP's witness alleged members of the Sri Lankan police force and army were directly implicated in the destruction of mass graves containing the remains of hundreds, and in some cases thousands of men, women and children after the conflict.

"This witness believes that senior [security forces] officials knew that graves were being identified for the purpose of exhumation, and permanent destruction, over a period of more than a year," said the report, which said there was an "urgent need" for further investigation.

CEO of Piac, Edward Santow, told Guardian Australia that its investigations also found strong evidence of well-aided claims that Sri Lankan forces attacked areas which they had encouraged civilians to take shelter in.

"What the Sri Lankan government did was it created what were called no-fire zones - areas where civilians, and particularly Tamils, were encouraged to congregate and the very clear implication was that they would be safe from attack," said Santow.

"However our analysis of what was on the public record and our further new evidentiary material shows that there were attacks, artillery bombardments, on key parts of the no-fire zones, including on hospitals that were clearly marked as hospitals."

The situation was "exacerbated" by the presence of LTTE forces in the area, and the investigation found strong evidence that civilians were used by Tamil forces as human shields.

"We're very concerned about that as well, and those allegations, if proven, could also constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity," said Santow.

Allegations of rape and sexual violence by Sri Lankan authorities continued well after the end of the conflict with one witness claiming she was raped by police in April 2012.

It's also alleged members of Sri Lankan forces and committed rape and sexual violence during screening processes and interrogations, in detention facilities, camps and government hospitals - conduct which could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The report also found a need for further investigation of "credible allegations" that Tamil forces forcibly recruited child soldiers, and strong evidence of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.

"What we've done is very methodically tried to follow the evidence and take it wherever it leads. The findings or conclusions one might draw from this is that there are very credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity both against the Sri Lankan government and also against members of the LTTE," said Santow.

"We know from history that in order to have a lasting peace and reconciliation there needs to be full accountability for atrocities that occur in civil war. That full accountability hasn't occurred yet and it seems that the only way in which that could occur is to have a full independent international inquiry into these issues."

The Australian government has close ties with Sri Lanka, and in November prime minister Tony Abbott came under fire for comments he made regarding allegations of torture in Sri Lanka that "sometimes in difficult circumstances difficult things happen".

The British prime minister David Cameron has called for investigations into allegations, and the US is expected to recommend formal investigations by the UN.

The Australian department of foreign affairs and trade did not respond to requests for comment.

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