

Sri Lanka conflict: refugees 'shelled in no-fire zone'

Tamil refugees who fled Sri Lanka's war zone by boat have given harrowing first eye-witness accounts of how they were shelled by the army in a "no-fire" civilian safe zone.



More than 280,000 refugees who fled the conflict zone could be held in camps for up to two years Photo: AP

By Dean Nelson, South Asia Editor

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The refugees were speaking from India's Andhra Pradesh coast where they landed nine days after fleeing the town of Mullaitivu in the war zone by boat. Ten of the 21 refugees, including a four year old child, died on the voyage, according to the campaign group Human Rights Watch, which interviewed them while they were recovering in hospital.

In a series of interviews, they revealed how friends and relatives had been killed in heavy army shelling of the so-called "no-fire zone" that the government had designated as a safe area for civilians.

S. Indra Kumar, one of the refugees, said his family had travelled to Puthumatalan inside the zone on the north-east coast but they soon came under heavy artillery fire.

"We were living in such fear. There was constant shelling. On April 5 or 6, our neighbours were injured in the shelling. A shell landed inside the bunker. Ten people were injured, and of them, five died. There was no anaesthesia. The doctors had to cut off a girl's hand without any anaesthesia. My small daughter was crying and scared. I decided then that we had to leave," he said.

The refugees said they had been trapped in small bunkers below houses for up to four hours during heavy shelling, and that many of the raids had followed firing from Tamil Tigers from within civilian areas.

One of the men whose wife and four year old son died during their hazardous sea voyage, said they had left because of a shortage of medicine. "In the beginning, before we came to the safe zone, the government hospital was still there. My wife just had a baby, so she needed medicine. But there was no medicine at the hospital. I waited a whole day for medicines.

"The ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] was giving tents, but they could not cope with the demand. We built a shelter with coconut thatch. And when it rained or there was shelling, we ran to the bunker. "There was shortage of food. One day, I was waiting in queue for food and there was suddenly shelling. I ran away, but later heard that 40 people had died," said Sivadasa Jagdeshwaran.

He said his wife's father had died, her two brothers had jumped overboard and she herself died after drinking sea water while weak with dehydration.

Meenakshi Ganguly of Human Rights Watch, who interviewed the survivors, said the Sri Lankan government had tried to stop stories like theirs from being heard. "These accounts must be multiplied tens of thousands of times to capture the full horror of those who remain trapped by the Tamil Tigers and shelled by government forces," she said.

The Sri Lankan government has consistently denied shelling civilians in the no-fire zone, though several Western governments and the United Nations believe they are continuing to attack the area with artillery and aerial bombing.



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