

Sri Lanka accused of killing Tamil leader in 'massacre'

The Sri Lankan army has been accused of the "massacre" of the last Tamil Tiger fighters hours after they surrendered their 26-year war for an independent state.

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By Dean Nelson, South Asia Editor

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The claim was made after the government announced soldiers had killed Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The guerrilla commander, who waged one of history's longest and bloodiest insurgencies, was killed by a rocket-propelled grenade as he tried to escape the war zone with his closest aides, according to the Sri Lankan government.

Soosai, the leader of his "Sea Tigers" navy, and Pottu Amman, his intelligence chief, are reported to have died alongside him.

Brig Udaya Nanayakkara, the army spokesman, claimed that Prabhakaran was dead and 250 other rebels had been killed as soldiers captured their last enclave on Sri Lanka's northern coast.

But a pro-LTTE website, Tamilnet, accused the army of conducting a "determined massacre" of the last surviving guerrillas.

According to the account, the leader of the political wing of the Tamil Tigers, B. Nadesan, contacted overseas supporters at 3am on Monday. He asked them to plead with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to evacuate the last 1,000 wounded fighters.

By this time, an official statement from the Tamil Tigers had already abandoned the 26-year war for an independent state. The movement said it had "silenced its guns" to prevent the loss of more civilian lives.

Hours later, however, Prabhakaran was apparently killed. B. Nadesan was also found dead along with the head of the LTTE's "peace secretariat".

The surrender came after the Tamil Tigers were squeezed into a tiny strip of land by Sri Lanka's army. The government reported that thousands of civilians, who had been trapped inside the last enclave controlled by rebels, were able to escape.

However, the United Nations believes that 7,000 civilians have been killed in northern Sri Lanka since the army's offensive escalated in January. Many died when the last area under rebel control, known as a "no-fire zone", came under heavy bombardment.

Evidence gathered by Human Rights Watch suggests that Sri Lanka's government broke a promise to refrain from shelling this area with heavy artillery. Hospitals and clinics were hit on at least 32 separate occasions in the space of five months. If these strikes were intentional, they could amount to breaches of international humanitarian law.

European Union foreign ministers said they were "appalled" by the civilian casualties and called for an independent investigation to establish whether either side in the conflict had broken the laws of war. "The EU calls for the alleged violations of these laws to be investigated through an independent inquiry. Those accountable must be brought to justice," said a statement.

Meanwhile, a crowd gathered outside the British High Commission in Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, and accused London of backing the Tamil Tigers. David Miliband, the Foreign Secretary, visited Sri Lanka last month and held a heated meeting with Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the defence minister.

While throwing stones and eggs at the High Commission building, the protesters burned a ragged suit, stuffed with straw, that was apparently designed to resemble Mr Miliband. The authorities made no effort prevent the demonstration.

Mr Miliband responded by saying: "This is not about burning effigies of me. This is about the real lives, the real bodies, of civilians in Sri Lanka. Those people who suffered in the past at the hands of the Tamil Tigers and those who are suffering today in the crossfire between the Tamil Tigers and the government."

Mr Miliband urged President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka to show "magnanimity in victory". The Foreign Secretary added: "Nothing would become the leadership of Sri Lanka better than to show, at this moment when it seems they have indeed destroyed their mortal enemy, they are ready to reach out to save innocent civilians."

However, Mr Rajapaksa has a strong alliance with China which is building a port on Sri Lanka's southern coast. Beijing protected its client by preventing the Security Council from discussing Sri Lanka's crisis until last week.



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