

India 'complicit' in killing of 20,000 civilians in Sri Lanka

India has been accused of complicity in the deaths of 20,000 civilians in the final stages of Sri Lanka's war against the Tamil Tigers.



Civilians stand behind the barbed-wire perimeter fence of the Manik Farm refugee camp located on the outskirts of northern Sri Lankan town of Vavuniy Photo: REUTERS

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Human rights groups have claimed India did not do enough to protect civilians in the war zone and a former commander on Indian peacekeeping forces in Sri Lanka has said India's role in the conflict was "distressing and disturbing".

"We were complicit in this last phase of the offensive when a great number of civilians were killed," Major General Ashok Mehta, who is now retired, told The Times. "Having taken a decision to go along with the campaign, we went along with it all the way and ignored what was happening on the ground."

India, a close neighbour of Sri Lanka, has provided the country with military equipment, training and intelligence over the past three years, diplomatic sources told the paper. It also gave the Sri Lanka's government unwavering diplomatic support and failed to use its influence to negotiate a ceasefire for civilians to escape the front line, they said.

India was part of a group led by China and Russia that blocked a proposal for a war crimes inquiry at a special session of the UN Human Rights Council last week, and instead supported a resolution praising Sri Lanka.

Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch, said India had failed to act when the Red Cross warned of an "unimaginable humanitarian catastrophe". India "could have saved many lives if it had taken a proactive position - and it would not have affected the outcome of the war," he said.

Sam Zarifi, Asia Pacific director of Amnesty International, said: "India . . . simply chose to support the [Sri Lankan] Government's notion that it could kill as many civilians as it would take to defeat the Tigers."

General Mehta said that the Indian Government, led by the Congress Party, wanted to match China and Pakistan who had increased arms sales to Sri Lanka in the past few years. It also wanted to avenge the Tigers' assassination in 1991 of Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister and late husband of Sonia Gandhi, he said.

India says that it provided Sri Lanka with non-lethal military equipment and sent officials repeatedly to persuade the Government to protect civilians. "We've consistently taken the line that the Sri Lankan Government should prevent civilian casualties," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said.



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