

## US warns Sri Lanka over failure to investigate war crimes

World is losing patience with Sri Lanka over its refusal to investigate war crimes, US warns, as new report details alleged massacre of 17 French aid workers



Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa has rejected any international investigation Photo: EPA

By Dean Nelson, South Asia Editor

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The international community is losing patience with Sri Lanka over its failure to investigate war crimes allegations, the United States has warned after new details emerged of atrocities.

Washington's leading diplomat for South Asia, Nisha Biswal, said she hoped Sri Lanka would soon start its own investigation into United Nations claims that 40,000 civilians were killed in the last few months of the country's long civil war in 2009.

Many of them were killed by army shelling of a so-called 'no-fire zone' which civilians had been urged to flee to for safety. There are also allegations that senior leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) were killed as they tried to surrender.

David Cameron, the prime minister, last month called for an international UN-backed war crimes investigation to be launched if Sri Lanka does not open its own inquiry by March next year.

Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa has rejected any international investigation, but Ms Biswal warned that international "patience will start to wear thin" if progress is not made soon.

The urgency was highlighted by a detailed report by the French charity Action Against Hunger (ACT) this week which claimed 17 of its local staff were executed by Sri Lankan forces in 2006.

According to the charity, its managers lost radio contact with local staff working in Muttur in Sri Lanka's northern province on August 4 2006 where they were the last aid workers to remain as government and Tamil Tiger rebels were locked in battle. They had been providing relief for the survivors of the 2004 tsunami, but were, along with other aid groups, suspected by government forces of being Tamil Tiger sympathisers.

A few days later they were found dead. According to the charity's own investigation, the staff had been lined up against the wall of their compound, forced to their knees and then shot dead at point blank range.

The charity said it had investigated the possibility that they had been killed by stray bullets or murdered by Tamil Tiger fighters, but said "all the direct and indirect evidence it could collect over the last seven years unequivocally points to the responsibility of the armed forces". The group had hoped local inquiries by a magistrate court, the National Commission for Human Rights and the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission would bring justice for the victims, but said it no longer believed any domestic organisation was capable of an independent inquiry.

It had decided, in frustration, to publish its own findings and call for those responsible for the massacre to be punished.

"With no prospect of an effective domestic investigation after seven years of inconclusive legal proceedings, ACF has decided to publicly say that it believes that the 17 aid workers were assassinated by Sri Lankan security forces and the criminals have been protected by Sri Lankan authorities," the report said.

The group's inquiry drew on investigations by local NGOs and by the United States embassy in Colombo. It quoted the findings of the Jaffna-based University Teachers for Human Rights group which described how the staff drinking tea and eating biscuits during a break when they were attacked.

One of their killers "got the staff to kneel and the victims were fired upon as they begged for mercy. It was all over in five minutes from the time they arrived," it said.

A report by the US Embassy in Colombo said it believed members of Sri Lanka's Special Task Force and the "Muslim Home Guard" were the "likely perpetrators".



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