

Sri Lanka rejects UN war crimes probe as more bodies found in mass grave

The Sri Lankan government has denounced a UN call for an international investigation into human rights abuses in its long civil war as 'unwarranted interference'



The UN believes 40,000 Tamils were killed in the last months of the war before the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009 Photo: Getty

By Dean Nelson, South Asia Editor

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More than forty new bodies were found in a mass grave in Sri Lanka's Tamil north, officials said on Tuesday, after the government rejected a UN call for an international inquiry into alleged war crimes.

The discovery of the grave in Mannar, a key battle zone in the last stages of Sri Lanka's long civil war, will increase pressure on the United Nations Human Rights Council to support an independent war crimes investigation when it meets in Geneva next month. Eighty bodies, including those of children, have now been recovered there and another mass grave with 155 bodies was discovered in 2012.

The report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, highlighted these mass graves in her report and said they demonstrated the "magnitude and gravity of the violations alleged to have been committed" by both sides. The thousands of civilians killed in the last months of the war in 2009 and allegations of summary executions of surrendering or arrested Tamil Tiger leaders demanded an independent investigation, the report said.

The UN believes 40,000 Tamils were killed in the last months of the war before the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. Many of them were killed in Army shelling of civilians in official "no-fire zones".

David Cameron, the prime minister, and other leaders had warned President Mahinda Rajapaksa at last year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Colombo that there would be an international inquiry if Sri Lanka did not launch its own credible and independent inquiry before March 2014.

Ms Pillay effectively called time on its delays when her report calling for an international investigation was released late on Monday evening.

Its failure to launch "independent or credible investigations," reflected a lack of political will, it added.

It cited political interference in the judiciary, continuing disappearances and intimidation of witnesses as further reasons for an international inquiry which would guarantee witness protection.

"The international community has a duty to take further steps, which will advance the right to truth for all in Sri Lanka," the report said.

Its criticisms of Sri Lanka's own reconciliation attempts were rejected by the government which said the report "reflects bias and is tantamount to an unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state".

Critics said Sri Lanka is hoping that support from China and Russia might help it defeat the war crimes inquiry proposal at the Human Rights Council meeting next month. But they will not be able to veto the proposal if a simple majority of the 47 council members support it.

Gordon Weiss, the UN's former Sri Lanka spokesman and author of *The Cage*, an account of the slaughter of civilians in the last months of 2009, said he believed the allegations are credible and must be investigated. "There's a simple reason these allegations have been repeated for years: They have merit. An independent international investigation will answer questions the government of Sri Lanka has proven incapable or unwilling to resolve," he said.



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