

NEWS

Up to 40,000 Tamil civilians massacred says former UN official

SRI LANKA'S military massacred as many as 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final onslaught against the Liberation Tigers in 2009, according to a former United Nations official with detailed knowledge of events, press reports said.

The former United Nations' spokesperson in Sri Lanka, Gordon Weiss, has resigned from the UN after 14 years and returned home to Australia, where he was interviewed by ABC News.

"He's now free to speak openly about the situation in Sri Lanka, for the first time and does so candidly and unflinchingly," the media agency said.

"About 300,000 civilians, plus the Tamil Tiger forces, were trapped in an area of territory about the size of Central Park in New York," says Weiss.

"They were within range of all the armaments that were being used, small and large, being used to smash the Tamil Tiger lines ... the end result was that many thousands lost their lives."

Gordon Weiss says his information comes from reliable sources who had a presence inside the battle zone, not Tamil civilians or fighters.

"The Sri Lankan government said many things which were either intentionally misleading, or were lies", Weiss told ABC's reporter Eric Campbell.

Weiss says that after the war ended, a senior civil servant openly admitted that the authorities had deliberately underestimated the number of trapped civilians "as a ploy to allow the government to get on with its business."

The United Nations responded to Weiss's comments by declaring that he did not represent the organization, and that they were his personal views.

"These views, communicated to the media are his personal ones and do not represent those of the United Nations," said the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka.

"The overall view of the UN on any particular situation comes from statements by the Secretary General or other senior UN figures," the statement said.

"The UN repeatedly and publicly said there were unacceptably

high civilian casualties from the fighting in the last months of the war, as a result of the LTTE forcibly preventing people leaving and the Government's use of heavy weapons in areas close to thousands of civilians," the statement added.

"While we maintained internal estimates of casualties, circumstances did not permit us to independently verify them on the ground, and therefore we do not have verifiable figures of how many casualties there were," the UN said.

The Sri Lankan government meanwhile said Weiss was spreading false information, about the last stages of the war.

"That is absolutely wrong information," Director General of the Media Centre for National Security Lakshman Hullugalle told Daily Mirror.

The paper quoted Hullugalle as saying "there was sufficient information provided at the time and months thereafter to confirm that such a large number of civilian deaths did not occur. We were able to show journalists through live footage how the LTTE were harassing civilians and how we were ensuring the safe passage of civilians."

Hullugalle insists that no other organizations made such claims in the past 8 months since the war, the paper said, quoting "[t]here were so many foreign and local journalists allowed in those areas. Therefore if there was any truth in this no one would have waited for 8 months to talk about it. And we have had no such complaints coming from any organization."

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama rejected all claims made by the former UN spokesperson saying Weiss had previously made such false statements.

"He is someone who has been making such false statements and we wholly reject these claims. He is also someone who has been sent out of the country," Bogollagama said.

While Hullugalle asserts that "so many foreign and local journalists allowed in those areas," media ban by Sri Lanka was widely known and was reported



Nearly 100,000 Tamil civilians remain in the Vanni internment camps, but even those who have been released often do not have a home to go to as they are kept out of their lands by the military

Resettlement deadline missed - again

SRI LANKAN government officials aim to resettle more than 100,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) by April after missing a self-imposed deadline to move everyone out of camps in the country's north by end-January.

Rishad Bathiudeen, Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, said the delay was due in part to incomplete demining activities in northern areas.

"It has impeded the resettlement process. The area needs to be completely safe for the people to resettle," Bathiudeen told IRIN.

"Administrative structures [in the areas] are now completely restored. They are also functional. Most schools, co-operatives and hospitals are now functioning," he added.

A fortnight after re-electing incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa for another six years, Sri Lanka's political focus is now on electing a new parliament, with the poll set for 8 April.

The secretary of the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, ULM Halaldeen, admitted there had been a delay in the resettlement process in the run-up to the presidential election on 26 January.

However, he said all the IDPs should be resettled by the time the parliamentary election is held, and insisted they would be able to vote.

"Come April, they all will be resettled in their own homes and leading more normal lives," Halaldeen told IRIN. "This is a process and we are continuing to resettle people at our earliest," he

said.

As of 5 February, there were more than 106,000 IDPs remaining in camps in the districts of Vavuniya, Mannar and Jaffna, according to the UN, citing government agents.

The government reports that less than 60,000 displaced remain in the Vanni camps, but other reports said that more than a hundred thousand of those who used to be held in the camps have not been resettled in their own places.

Many Tamil refugees, who fled the war in late 2008 and early 2009 have sought refuge with their relatives and friends but some of them continue to live in temporary sheds put up on government lands, according to reports from the Kilinochchi District Secretariat.

The government issues false figures so as to create a picture that all is going well according to plans with the resettlement, the Secretariat sources charged.

The government reports that about 160,000 IDPs have been returned to their districts of origin, while 29,060 people have been released from temporary camps into host families and elders' homes.

Meanwhile, IDPs in the camps continue to stay only because of the cooked meals supplied there, Tamil reports said. Those who had left the camps are not allowed to return to the camps. They starve with their families as government authorities and other welfare organizations do not take care of them, civil society sources in Jaffna told TamilNet.

More than 280,000 were dis-

placed in the fighting and living in government camps soon after the war ended in May 2009.

At the same time, the latest report issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) warns of funding shortfalls from February for agencies operating in Menik Farm, the largest IDP camp.

The lack of funding is expected to affect services, including the maintenance of sanitation facilities, provision of food and education, it says in the report to 29 January.

It also says that most returnees have expressed satisfaction at restarting their lives in their areas of origin but notes several challenges, including insufficient basic services, transport limitations and damaged or destroyed property and shelters.

"Indications of tensions among communities arriving at different stages of the return process had surfaced, with the civil administration indicating that it would [be] strengthening its role to support resolution of disputes," it says.

Legislators representing Sri Lanka's northeastern provinces also expressed concern over the practicality of resettlement initiatives.

As a result of these, IDPs would be grappling with "uninhabitable homes without the necessary facilities to help them lead a normal life", said Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian, Suresh Premachandran. "It will take at least two years to resettle people properly with their infrastructure needs being met."

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