

One Hundred Thousand Tamils Missing After Sri Lanka War

Written by Frances Harrison –

Monday, 17 December 2012 20:33 - Last Updated Monday, 17 December 2012 20:41



World Bank population data from Sri Lanka indicates up to a hundred thousand Tamils are unaccounted for after the final war against the Tamil Tiger rebels in 2009, raising questions about whether they could be dead. A UN report cited a death toll of forty thousand for the climax of the war in 2009 but a UN internal inquiry last month acknowledged for the first time that up to seventy thousand civilian deaths were possible. The leaked World Bank spreadsheets broken down by village for the north of the island estimate numbers of returnees to the former conflict area in mid 2010. The Bank also cites Statistical Handbook Numbers for population in 2007 – before the fighting intensified. The two sets of data reveal 101,748 people missing from Mullaitivu District – the area that bore the brunt of the final fighting. This is the equivalent of 28,899 households. This number has been confirmed to me by the World Bank, though they add “other interpretations about the population data that are not included in the document can not be attributed to the World Bank”. A similar conclusion about the missing population can be drawn when comparing the 2010 World Bank data with census numbers from 2006. The latter were the result of a joint government and rebel head count in the area. Sceptics might argue the 2006 figures were probably exaggerated by the Tigers and local officials close to them in order to secure more aid. However exactly the same argument could be made for inflating numbers in 2010, which were similarly used for allocating aid.

It's also not clear if the 2010 World Bank resettlement estimates include the 11,000 Tamil combatants held in detention at that point – or many thousands of Tamils who bribed their way out of the internment camp and escaped to southern India. It's also possible some of the missing Tamils settled elsewhere in the island but unlikely very large numbers because they do not appear elsewhere in the northern provinces judging by the Bank's own data. The onus is now on the Sri Lankan government to explain why huge numbers of people appear to be missing from their own population data.

“I lost count of how many bodies I buried in 2009,” says Murugan, a Tamil fisherman from Sri Lanka now in France, with a scar under his right eye from fighting for the naval wing of the Tamil Tigers. “I just keep seeing the bodies of babies just four or five months old, their limbs and heads and body parts spread all over the place,” he says, tormented by nightmares.

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By the climax of Sri Lanka's conflict in 2009, hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians were penned into a tiny spit of sandy land along the eastern coast, living in squalid makeshift encampments, starving, exhausted and under fire from the Sri Lankan military. Rebel fighters like Murugan couldn't go out to sea to fight in their gunboats because they were hemmed in, so these burly men were ordered to dispose of the bodies as quickly as possible before they started to rot in the tropical heat. They had experience – after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami Sea Tigers pulled out the rotting limbs from the marshes.

By late January 2009 the corpses started mounting up as the army shelled a safe zone it had demarcated for civilians and hundreds of thousands of people fled under fire towards the coast. "I saw a river full of dead bodies. I can't describe it. It was as if a tsunami had come again but this time inland," says Murugan.

In March in a small coastal village called Puttumattalan where a hundred thousand people had taken shelter, Murugan says he was ordered to bury 700 people who died trying to cross over the lagoon to the army side at night. "I think the army must have thought they were Tigers advancing on them and they were all killed near the edge of the water," he says.

It took five or six days to dispose of all the corpses. Murugan had to erect a fence to block the view of the Sri Lankan snipers on the other side of the water so he could bring in an earthmover to scoop up the dead without being shot at.

"We just dropped the bodies in ditches because there were so many. It was the worst thing in the world. They were all sorts – men, women and kids. More women than men, but children of all ages. Sometimes even now I think of committing suicide. It was terrible. It was like a crematorium, bodies and more bodies and blood everywhere. Till I die I will never forget what I saw there".

Murugan's account is consistent with testimony from many other survivors, who describe a nightmarish place. Many have stories of climbing out of their primitive bunkers after a night of relentless shelling only to find the dismembered body parts of their neighbours strewn about.

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Today the scale of the tragedy in 2009 in that tiny corner of Sri Lanka is not known. The Sri Lankan government excluded international aid workers and independent journalists from the war zone, making reliable information hard to come by. We now know a UN data collection team received unconfirmed reports of fifty thousand deaths and injuries during the war but by the final weeks it was impossible to count bodies. Wikileaks cables reveal the UN came to a very rough estimate of between 7,000-17,000 people missing presumed dead in the final week of fighting in May 2009.

By then the makeshift hospital had ceased functioning, leaving the injured to die. Already the survival rate had dropped drastically; people were exhausted, their reserves depleted. Medicine and food were desperately short. On May 10th a Catholic priest wrote to the Pope saying there had been 3318 dead the night before and 4000 injured. On the final day of the war another Catholic priest told me he'd seen thousands of bodies lying about as he left the war zone. I questioned him about whether he meant hundreds and he repeated thousands.

Nearly four years on there is no agreed death toll, even to the nearest ten thousand lives. That's why an international investigation is required to establish the truth about what may be one of the least reported but worst atrocities of recent decades – both in terms of the speed and the scale of the killing.

Courtesy: <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/one-hundred-thousand-tamils-missing-after-sri-lanka-war/>