

Report exposes sexual torture of Sri Lankan detainees

Panini Wijesiriwardena
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A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report has documented 75 torture cases in Sri Lankan detention centres, revealing the use of rape and other forms of sexual violence by the security forces against suspected supporters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

HRW, a New York-based organisation, examined the cases of 31 men, 41 women and 3 boys in its 141-page report, *We will teach you a lesson—sexual violence against Sri Lankan Tamils by Sri Lankan security forces*.

A UN report had previously said there was credible evidence that 40,000 civilians were killed during the last weeks of the war against the LTTE, which was defeated in 2009, and that government officials and military commanders were responsible for serious violations of international law, some amounting to “war crimes.” The UN panel also cited complaints of sexual violence.

The HRW report examines one aspect of the gross abuses of democratic rights and crimes for which the government and military are responsible during and after the civil war.

The HRW report examined abuses that occurred between 2006—the year President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government renewed the civil war—and 2012, that is three years after the end of the war. Some detainees had been raped for several days, often by several military, police or paramilitary personnel.

Releasing the report in London on February 26, Brad Adams, HRW’s director for Asia, said: “Sri Lankan security forces have committed untold numbers of rapes of Tamil men and women in custody.” He added: “These are not just wartime atrocities but continue to the present, putting every Tamil man and woman arrested for suspected LTTE involvement at serious

risk.”

HRW was not able to openly conduct investigations in Sri Lanka and interview detainees still in the custody. As a result, its report covered only a “tiny fraction” of the “custodial rape in political cases”. According to HRW, sexual violence has been a key element of the torture used to extract “confessions” of involvement in LTTE activities.

The report stated that in most of the cases, Tamils were abducted from their homes by unidentified men, taken to detention centres and abusively interrogated about alleged activities. Many victims confirmed their accounts with medical and legal reports.

A 23-year-old man said he was raped for three consecutive days until he signed a confession.

A woman said she was stripped and photographed naked. “They told me to confess about everything. I refused to confess as I thought they would kill me. I was beaten up and tortured continuously. On the second day, a man came to my room and raped me. I was raped by different men on at least three days. I can’t remember how many times.”

In another case, UM, 25 was detained at Arunachalam camp, which was part of the military-controlled Manik Farm camp complex, where nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians were incarcerated after escaping from the war zone. Soldiers took her to another army camp, where they questioned her about links with the LTTE.

She told the HRW: “I said I was forced to work for the LTTE and did not know anything. They did not believe me. They beat me, pulled my hair, and banged my head on a wall ... One soldier said: ‘We will teach you a lesson.’ I lost consciousness that day and when I came to I realised I had been raped. This went on many days.”

From Manik Farm, about 12,000 detainees, many of them young men and women, were taken by the military to secret detention centres.

The report drew attention to a long record of sexual torture, throughout the 26 years of war. One prominent case was the arrest of 17-year-old schoolgirl, Krishanthi Kumaraswami, by soldiers at an army checkpoint in Jaffna during September 1996. When her mother, younger brother and a neighbour went in search of her, they were taken into custody and put to death. After raping Krishanthi, soldiers killed her and buried her body with the three others.

After this crime led to public outrage, the government was forced to instruct the police to arrest the soldiers. The accused were later brought to trial and sentenced to death. But there were many other cases in which the police and security forces went scot-free. In some instances, police investigations and court cases dragged on for years.

The government and the military have tried to dismiss the HRW report as a fraud. At a media briefing last week, cabinet minister Keheliya Rambukwella branded the report a “total fabrication” and accused HRW of tarnishing the country’s image. “If they are making allegations they should give us the medical evidence, so we can see if we’ve investigated,” he said.

Army spokesman Ruwan Wanigasooriya called the report a “creation”. He added: “We have a strong law and order system in the country. If there is evidence for such allegations then it should be reported to the police, and investigations will be carried out.”

However, the Sri Lankan security forces function with impunity, with the government just brushing aside all allegations, including those of war crimes. Victims are arbitrarily detained under emergency laws or the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The notorious criminal investigation department and terrorist investigation division obtain so-called confessions using torture. Prisoners are told to sign blank sheets of paper, or statements written in the Sinhala language, which most ethnic Tamils cannot understand.

The HRW report has been issued amid increasing pressure by the Western powers on Rajapakse’s government over human right violations. Its release coincided with the UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva, and HRW’s call for an “international investigation” is in line with the interests of the US and its

allies. Having backed Rajapakse’s war, the major powers are now cynically using the issue of human rights to insist that he distance himself from China, which gained influence in Sri Lanka during the war.

Nevertheless, the HRW report provides damning evidence of the torture of Tamil prisoners, underscoring the continuing systematic discrimination and repression directed against the country’s Tamil minority.



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