

PEOPLE FOR EQUALITY AND RELIEF IN LANKA

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Tamil Civilians in Sri Lankan “Safe Zones” are as Safe as Those in Srebrenica Genocide

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A few days ago, health officials in Sri Lanka reported that the Sri Lankan military bombed a hospital and a village within a government-declared “safe zone,” killing Tamil civilians. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, one of the longest running in the world, has often been described as a civil war. However, this event, like many of the actions aimed at Tamil civilians throughout this conflict, signals that what is occurring is more egregious than civil war; it is genocide.



Deliberate attacks on “Safe Zones”

The latest attacks on Tamil civilians within government “safe zones” are the most recent proof of genocide, with parallels to the massacre in Srebrenica. The 1995 massacre of Bosniaks in Srebrenica occurred within a UN “safe area” and the International Court of Justice eventually ruled it genocide. Of course, there are factual differences between the two: the methods used for genocide, the development and purpose of the safe zones, and the amount of time that the safe zone had been established before the massacres, are among some of them. However, despite the differences, the genocidal intent combined with the added cruelty of subjecting civilians to the false hope of safety, is clear in each.



The international community vowed to never allow another Srebrenica. Kofi Annan’s calls for prevention even begat the emerging international doctrine of Responsibility to Protect. And yet, we are already in the middle of another Srebrenica in Sri Lanka. There are 300,000 Tamil civilians displaced by the conflict in the North and, according to local sources, the Sri Lankan government unilaterally coordinated the safe zone area with the ICRC,

passing out pamphlets telling those civilians where to go. After many of the displaced were sent to the safe zone, the government shelled it. The ongoing nature of the massacre in Sri Lanka makes it difficult to precisely compare it to the Srebrenica genocide, yet the past atrocities give a

bleak blueprint of what may be ahead. The similarities with the Srebrenica genocide make it even more imperative for the international community to intervene before Tamils experience the same loss of life as the Bosniaks.

The BBC has quoted a Government official in Mullaitivu district reporting that 100 civilians were killed during the week of January 15. A recent New York Times article quoted a United Nations official, not authorized to speak with media, stating there have been at least 11 aerial attacks by the Government on hospitals inside LTTE-held areas in the North. Another UN official, resident coordinator Neil Buhne, told the BBC “There have been many civilians killed over the last two days. It’s really a crisis now.” Buhne reported that there has “definitely been fighting” in the “safe zone”. Attacks against the civilian “safe zone” are resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries. The safe zone seems to be used as a location to corral Tamils together in order to create an easier target, and provide evidence of the genocidal intent of the Sri Lankan government.

Under Cover of Silence

Adding to the devastation of the massacre is that there are no independent sources verifying the details of the attacks. The perpetrators may act with impunity. The Sri Lankan government refuses the involvement of most independent parties, aid workers and monitoring agencies. Furthermore, independent media are banned from the area and local journalists who have criticized the government are often found murdered.

Because the international community has not intervened, it aids the government in obscuring its actions. The lack of reliable information means that we may never be able to prove whether the safe zone shelling was genocide or not. Unfortunately, there are plenty of other historical, documented occurrences to support a finding of the Sri Lankan government’s genocidal intent: most infamously, the Black July Pogrom of 1983, and more recently, the deprivation of humanitarian aid to Tamil areas affected by the tsunami.

One thing is not disputed between the two sides: Tamils are dying. We urge you to demand international intervention in two ways in order to prevent further violence. First, we ask that you please join the Genocide Prevention Project and Tamil civilians around the world in recognizing that the situation in Sri Lanka is amounting to genocide. If your organization finds that there is not enough compelling information over the sixty-year conflict to call the situation genocide, we encourage you to call these recent attacks on safe zones “acts of genocide”. At the very least, demand that independent investigators enter Sri Lanka in order to document these attacks on safe zones, and to work to protect Tamil civilians.

Please contact PEARL for further information or visit www.pearlaction.org.