

Human Shields in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The proud national anthem of Sri Lanka starts off with the words “**Namo Matha...**” unique is that it is a song of praise to the country alone. It does not specifically glorify any race, caste, creed, community or religion. It is non-partisan and appeals to the patriotism of all the people in–Mother Lanka. Due to Sri Lanka’s strategic geographic position we were lucky to be spared from much of the world’s war ravages. Our own armies have not gone out solely on the intention to instill an act of terror or conquer lands, Sri Lanka was not a martial race spoiling for a war nor a fight. However, when ideologies and differences cannot be settled amicably the weapons speak, wars happen bringing violent death and massive destruction to the economic structure and the overall deterioration of social standards. Similarly, in the history, Sri Lanka has a few dark pages where the country underwent into several communal clashes which turned out to be bloody wars.

The LTTE, or also known as the Tamil Tigers, emerged out with a dedicated aim to the fight for an independent state for the Tamils. Thereafter the LTTE began the war by ambushing an army convoy and killed thirteen soldiers. This incident provoked Riots. Thus, led the armed conflict In Sri Lanka which began in 1983 this incurred heavy human and economic costs with many lives lost, and more than one million people displaced and civilian with acute humanitarian need. When the LTTE was eventually defeated and its leadership brought to an end on May 18th 2009. Many lives were lost due to the civil war and many still suffer from the consequences of it. The war was noted for its extreme bitterness, with the Tamil Tigers using suicide bombing, human shields, child soldiers as their tactical weapon. During the long-drawn war in Sri Lanka Civilians have been extensively used as shields for protection, coercion, or deterrence. The term “**human shields**” is described as a method of warfare which was prohibited by the International Humanitarian Law where the presence of civilians or the movement of the civilian population, whether voluntary or involuntary, is used in order to shield military objectives from attack, or to shield, favor or impede military operations. In both international and non-international armed conflicts, the use of human shields is prohibited

and the rules are set in the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions as well as the Additional Protocol I. Additionally, the International Criminal Court declares that “utilizing the presence of a civilian or other protected person to render certain points, areas or military forces immune from military operations” constitutes a war crime. During the war the LTTE had forced many innocent civilians into a narrow strip of land on Sri Lanka's northeastern coast, effectively using several hundred thousand people as human shields. The LTTE heavily incurred and injured, brutally killed many of those who were trying to flee from their control of the war zone and seek basic humanitarian assistance and shelter to government-held territory which was on standby to help and save the innocent civilians. LTTE forces had also deployed near the densely populated areas, placing civilians in increased danger of attack. According to Human Rights Watch Report titled “Trapped and Mistreated” December 2008, the LTTE is using the displaced population as a human shield and preventing them from leaving LTTE territory.

It is evident that no attention has been paid towards the actions of the LTTE for forcibly taking a large population of Tamil civilians into an area demarcated by Sri Lanka's Government as the No Fire Zone and making them immune from attack. The LTTE had bundle civilians (as hostages or human shields) into an atmosphere such as schools, places of religious worship, hospitals etc. After a long struggle by the valiant Sri Lanka Army 58 Division rescued over 30,000 civilians who were held as a hostage by LTTE terrorists at Puthumathalan and Amplalavanpokkani areas have been liberated. The mass rescue operation reached a huge significant phase when troops captured the 3 km long earth bund built by the LTTE, on the western border of the No Fire Zone in (April 20.2009) with this capture it created a safe route for the hostages to come out of the LTTE's grip and gave tens of thousands of civilians to be free to seek refuge with the soldiers of Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, Defence sources on the field said that LTTE terrorists have launched many cowardly attacks at the Tamil civilians who tried to leave their grip. The Defence.lk special correspondent in the area has said that three LTTE suicide cadres have exploded themselves killing dozens of refugees including women and children. "The terrorists initially fired at the civilians on the causeway using heavy machine guns. When they stepped into the lagoon to avoid LTTE machine gunfire, three LTTE cadres ran on to them and exploded themselves”

However, when we take a look at the LTTE they have deliberately prevented civilians under its effective control from fleeing to areas and unlawfully placed many lives at grave risk. The LTTE has forced civilians to retreat and prolonged the danger they face and kept them far apart from obtaining any sort of humanitarian assistance thus to make it convenient for the them to use the civilians as human shield for their own advantage. Furthermore, as the areas that was controlled by the LTTE strengthened the trapped civilians became the

concentrated increasing risk in the events of attacks and placed great strains on the civilian's life thus making situation difficult for the government to defend and save lives. The civilians were more desperate to escape these torture chambers and more and more people have tried to flee from the so called LTTE controlled territories. As mentioned on the video above the LTTE has forcibly tried to block these attempts by firing at civilians. **The fact that many innocent Tamil civilians were desperately seeking to escape from the LTTE's grip clearly indicates the amount of false accusations of a genocide and mass killings by the Sri Lankan armed forces is simply a major smokescreen and nothing short of ridiculing an achievement no military has been able to do in the world.** The so called patriotic Supporters of LTTE through an euphoric fantasy called the Eelam sensationalizing, have hidden the most horrid crimes that should have been condemned worldwide and international organizations must look into the atrocities and shed light on the real story that took place during the war.

The LTTE's killing of civilians, LTTE's use of military equipment amongst civilians, LTTE's forcible recruitment and force labor, LTTE's killing of civilians through suicide attacks and the crime involved in demanding that its recruits (forced or otherwise) commit suicide by taking cyanide is the reality that happened to the civilians who were forced to stand between the line of fire proves that these ruthless radicals have indeed committed several crimes and twisted and turned the stories to portray the Sri Lankan government in a unpleasant manner and accusing the government of harming the civilians when their main intention was to safeguard all Sri Lankans.

If the no fire zone or civilian safety zone was meant to be a safe haven only for the civilians – what were LTTE terrorists including its own leader doing inside this zone as an armed terror group when they should have been fighting the Sri Lankan Military? perhaps this step might prove the fact that they were using the innocent Tamil civilians as a human shield and thus putting countless lives for their own selfish thoughts.

Thus, it is a clear violation of international laws and war ethics especially when LTTE was using the very civilians who have been used as an active slogan for international propaganda purposes to warrant acceptance internationally and to allow it to secretly camouflage its terrorism. It must be noted that the Sri Lankan military ensured to follow all principles and continually made way to uphold the civilian's safety at all cost. All the targets were evaluated, timely moreover, the army had been given orders to adhere to a "zero civilian casualty" policy.

Conclusion

“In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act”- George Orwell

The LTTE employed a variety of tactics to offset their own weakness and exploited the vulnerabilities of the Sri Lankan armed forces. In contrast the Sri Lankan government’s main focus was to have minimum casualties keeping in mind that the lives of each of every Sri Lankan was important the many valiant soldiers scarified their lives to the betterment of the country. Yet certain mouth pieces or devoted patrons living in abroad and internally have twisted the story and fabricated their lies to project the Sri Lankan government’s efforts into something almost invisible. The crimes committed by the LTTE should be brought to a spot light, questions must be raised, the silence must be shattered. The method that they introduced to the world such as pioneering the use of suicide bombers and human shields should serve a chilling reminder to the government and international forums around the world on just how formidable an insurgent group can become.

Lughadarini Yogaraja served as an Intern (Research) at the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS), the premier think tank on National Security established under the Ministry of Defence. The opinion expressed in this article are her own and not necessarily reflective of the INSS.

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