Priyamvatha | Vanni (Sri Lanka), August 9, 2011
The closing stages of the Sri Lankan civil war were a story of extreme brutality against civilians by the army. Despite being widely documented, Colombo remains in denial about atrocities on Tamils in the country's north and the east.The survivors of the war still live in fear, in one of the most densely militarised zones of the world, devoid of any hope of ever getting justice. Headlines Today correspondent Priyamvatha travelled (undercover) to Vanni, the former stronghold of the Tamil Tiger rebels in north Sri Lanka, to unravel the facts behind the claims and counterclaims in the land that was witness to one of the worst war crimes committed on civilians anywhere in the world.

As Headlines Today reached the Vanni region, it was swarming with soldiers of the Sri Lankan army, made up almost entirely of the majority Sinhalas. There was a soldier on patrol every few meters and there was a check post on every 100 meters.

The army has built major military cantonments across the Vanni on land mostly forcefully acquired from the local Tamil population in what has been recognised in some quarters as the core of the Tamil Homeland.

A sense of fear and insecurity could be seen among the local Tamil population, with very few people agreeing to speak on camera. The people, interviewed at secret locations, feared death if the tapes fell in the hands of the security personnel.

War victim Rosy, 45, doesn't want to live. Even after two years, just the word "war" brings shivers and tears for this Tamil woman. Rosy witnessed Sri Lankan air force jets bomb an areas designated as a "Safe zone" by the government.

On May 14, 2009, a day after she moved into the safe zone at Vattuvaha from Killinochi with her husband, a son, four daughters, a son-in-law and 10-month-old grandson, the zone came under attack.

"The bomb fell on the place we were living. These are the silent ones. We realised only after the area was bombarded. There was smoke all around. I didn't know anything. My hand was sliced

and splinters lodged in my chest. My son picked me up and hid me. I asked him to look for my daughters. He assured me that everything was fine. But he knew all were dead. All my children died. Nothing is left," said Rosy, adding, "On that day of the war alone I saw 3000 people die before my eyes."

For Rathi, another war victim, that deadly day when she lost her husband and son in the war still brings back the sad events. "I was in the bunker. My son and husband were outside eating food. From the air, the bomb fell and exploded into splinters. Pieces of it killed my son and husband. We heard the sound," says Rathi, as she breaks down.

Rathi's daughter Lavanya says, "Army bombed us at Vallipuna. They used chemical bombs. It fell on the ground from air, went into pieces, but there wouldn't be sound."

Chemical bomb

"I was going to surrender with my family through a priest. But my second child was affected by chemical bomb. It's phosphorous. He was completely affected," said another victim Devi.

"All small children and old people were lying in the hospital without help. In this attack, two children, an old woman and my husband and son died," said Rathi.

Thambi, an eight-year-old victim, who had lost his entire family except his mother, describes how even children were not spared. He was injured in the war. "There was shelling always. There were bombs everywhere. Look at this injury. I had to run for my life," says Thambi.

The civilians had to run from pillar to post for the treatment of the injured. But hospitals were also not safe. Kavya's father, who was injured in the war, later died.

"We had taken father to hospital. That's when the bombardment happened. One girl died and two boys died, with brains coming out from their head," said Kavya.

The cries of these victims say it all.

Torture at secret camp
The list of war violations by the Sri Lankan army extends to the camps where women were harassed. Here is a first hand account of a woman who spent one year at a supposedly secret camp, which was not revealed to the world by the Sri Lankan government.

"It is a torture camp. No basic amenities were allowed. NGOs weren't allowed," said Sundari.

"It is a military campâ€¦for whatever problem we had, we had to approach the armymen right? That was exploited by the army and in the nightâ€¦we all were together. They misbehaved with some women," says Sandari.

"There have been rapes. Girls are raped. But how will girls tell this out? They would be embarrassed. It is a matter of dignityâ€¦ what else happened," Sundari adds.

"They would be very violent. They are Sinhalese and we are Tamils. We are scared of everything. We don't know the language. Women were looked at voyeuristically by the armyâ€¦," she says.

Reporter: There are reports that women were shut in a room without dress?

Sundari: Yeahâ€¦.they kept harassing us if we were from LTTE. They kept us and harassed us.

Another victim Divya says, "Two or three women were kidnapped. They have taken pictures while taking bath."

The situation was no different for LTTE cadres who were put in camps. Young men, even

educated ones, had to swallow the humiliation. Murugan, a former LTTE cadre who was in the intelligence wing, was kept in the camp for almost one year. Now, he is out to be a part of the society. But he finds it difficult to forget the harrowing tales.

"We were kept in a reformation camp to rehabilitate former cadres like me. But more than reforming us, we became more violent. It was beyond torture. We were kept like cattle. Once a major and lieutenant colonel came to meet us. There were 800 of us. They had masked their faces. We were seen as demons," says Murugan.

Rosy adds, "We drank water from drainage, from wells where dead bodies were thrown. I know a mother and a child who fell into well and committed suicide due to hunger. I saw with my eyes."

"Sri Lankan army grabbed our land. They used weapons against us and our people. I joined LTTE in the last phase of war. They called, but I went to save the rights of our people. There was a necessity," says Shiva.

The UN says over 40,000 people were killed during the last stages of the 30-year civil war that ended in May 2009, with a full military victory for the Sri Lanka army. Non-governmental sources put the figure at over a lakh and a half.

Execution style killings, aerial bombardment of hospitals and designated "safe zones", sexual assaults on civilians and female combatants, use of chemical weapons, cluster bombs, denial of medical aid to injured civilians, illegal confinement without charges - these are some of the many war crimes Sri Lanka is accused of.

Some say it is not just the Sri Lankan army that inflicted atrocities on the helpless civilians. The LTTE also has blood on its hands. Deepan, whose 16-year-old son Rajan was kidnapped from school by the LTTE, is shattered. "My son was 16 years old. LTTE cadres took him away to join their forces. We didn't want to send him. He had big dreams and was studying in school," says Deepan.

http://indiatoday.intoday.in/site/story/sri-lanka-war-crimes-lanka-army-war-ltte/1/147593.html

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