



வடகிழக்கு மனித உரிமைகள் செயலகம்

North East Secretariat on Human Rights - NESOHR

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Mullaithivu hospital complex shelling

On 9 August 2008, at 1.00am, several shells fired by the Sri Lanka military exploded around the Mullaithivu district hospital surroundings (see map). One shell exploded 25 meters from the hospital electricity generator. This was just 50 meters from the main hospital building. Another shell exploded just seven meters from the residence of the Medical Superintendent for the hospital, causing extensive damages to it (see photo below). The location of this explosion was 75 meters from the main hospital building. Another shell exploded 50 meters from the nurses' quarters and inside the hospital playground. A fourth shell exploded near the residence of the Mullaithivu Government Agent (GA) that adjoins the hospital, causing slight injury to the GA. The exact locations of the shell explosions are marked in the map. Nearly 40 more shells exploded within 150 meters surrounding the area marked in the map.



The hospital location and the location of the residence of the GA are known to the Sri Lanka military. Given this, it is worth studying a few issues deriving from this incident. Firstly why did the Sri Lanka military target this large civilian hospital? Secondly, how has the international media that reports on the conflict and military outcomes handle this attack? Thirdly, how did the Government of Sri Lanka escape reproach for this act?

Indeed a baby was killed, four women, one of them pregnant, were seriously injured, in the houses surrounding this area. Many other sustained less serious injuries. Livestock were killed. Extensive damages were caused to buildings in the surroundings.

It is easy to dismiss attacks on civilians living inside any war zone as collateral damage and thus eliminate any need to treat it seriously. It is, however, difficult to treat the above incident in this light because of the sensitiveness of the location and because the Sri Lanka military has not claimed to have attacked a military target. With this in mind, one can observe the manner in which the media handled this event.

The simple fact is that none of the media other than those owned by Tamils gave much attention to this incident. Indeed most did not report it at all. One obvious reason for this is the lack of phone lines into Vanni that was cut by the Government of Sri Lanka. At the time of this incident and since then the phone lines remain cut. Had the Mullaithivu GA a phone line, media would have talked to her about the incident of which she had many words because she experienced it directly and was horrified by it. But she had no such phone line that was working at that time. There are however, many satellite phones in Vanni belonging to both international agencies working here. The international agencies keep a very low profile in reporting against the Government of Sri Lanka in order to keep their working space; thus the amnesia of the international media regarding this event.

Can all this justify the Government of Sri Lanka escaping condemnation for attacking a civilian hospital? Yet, it has.

In the ongoing war against LTTE, could the media and the other Sri Lanka watchers continue to allow such incidents, to be blacked out and, to pass without any condemnation?

Map of the Mullaithivu hospital complex showing locations of explosions of shells fired by Sri Lanka military

