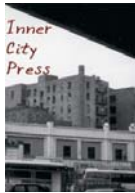


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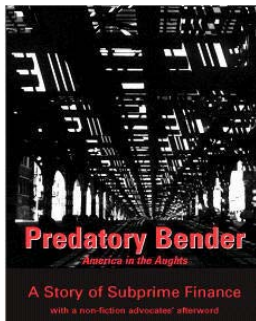
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In N. Sri Lanka, 2,683 Civilian Killings This Year, UN Leaked Documents Show

Byline: Matthew Russell Lee of Inner City Press at the UN: *Exclusive*

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 -- After claiming of Sri Lanka that "we don't count bodies," the UN has now involuntarily [admitted](#) that the "minimum number of documented civilian casualties since 20 January 2009, as of 7 March 2009 in the conflict area of Mullaitivu Region [is] 9,924 casualties including 2,683 deaths and 7,241 injuries," in a [leaked document of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs obtained by Inner City Press](#).

OCHA's top official John Holmes, as well as spokespeople for UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, have repeatedly denied that the UN has such casualty figures. Now it appears that unlike in other conflicts from Darfur to Gaza, the UN withheld the Sri Lanka figures, in effect protecting the Sri Lankan government from criticism.

On February 17, Inner City Press asked Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's spokesperson Michele Montas for the UN's estimate of civilian deaths, and whether it was higher or lower than 1200. Ms Montas replied that "we are trying to save people, not count bodies." Video [here](#), from Minute 22:48.

On March 17, Inner City Press cited the [just-obtained internal OCHA casualty figure](#) of 9,924 including 2,683 deaths to the Ambassador of a European country active with OCHA, asking if Holmes had disclosed this number in the two "classified" briefings on Sri Lanka the Ambassador had mentioned. "Everyone knows the figures are controversial," the Ambassador

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said, insisting that he not be identified by name or country. "You won't hear these figures from OCHA." But internally, they are in writing.

Another [leaked UN document](#) published today by Inner City Press show that the UN has its own figures for the number of civilians trapped between the Sri Lankan military and the Tamil Tigers, more than twice as high as the government's claimed numbers. The UN document put the number of internally displaced people in Mullaitivu at 150,000 to 190,00, and says that the International Committee of the Red Cross agrees. The UN then dryly but telling reports on "70,000 -- the number of IDPs in Mullaitivu according to the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL)."



UN's Ban and Sri Lanka's President, 2862 killed civilians not shown

The Sri Lankan government in fact contests any numbers, and most statements, put out by the UN. The Sri Lankan government previous accused John Holmes of being a terrorist, for calling the country dangerous for humanitarian workers. Holmes apparently internalized the criticism, and now has refused to publicly disclose these UN figures, or even admit that they exist, unlike his repeated listing of casualty figures for both Darfur and Gaza. (Neither the governments of Sudan or Israel even called Holmes a terrorist -- they now may wish to do so.)

On March 16, [Inner City Press asked Ban Ki-moon's deputy spokesperson Marie Okabe](#) for the UN's response to reports of 500 additional deaths due to lack of medicine in the conflict zone -- "is the United Nations or specialized agencies or OCHA aware of this?" -- and about a [published](#) threat by the "National Freedom Front" to surround the UN in Colombo if any action is taken on UN High Commissioner on Human Rights Navanethem Pillay's report connecting the government, as well as the Tamil Tigers, to war crimes.

Deputy Spokesperson Okabe: What I can tell you about Sri Lanka is that the humanitarian workers on the ground are obviously doing their best to try to assist the most vulnerable on the ground. The Secretary-General just spoke with the President of Sri Lanka, during which he appealed for, expressed his concern for, the safety of the civilians, especially those trapped in Vanni.

Inner City Press: See, that's what he said. Did he get any commitments back from the other side?

[Deputy Spokesperson Okabe](#): My understanding is that the President did express his cooperation. But the Secretary-General, as I mentioned, did express his strong concerns for the civilian population on the ground.

While it took several rounds of questions before Ban belated called for a suspension of fighting, so far his entreaties have not been acted on by the Sri Lankan government. Some say the UN was withholding its civilian casualty figures to help it convince the Sri Lankan government to suspend bombing, as the UN has asked both Israel and Sudan. But Sri Lanka, more than either Israel in Gaza or Sudan in, most recently, Muhajiriya in South Darfur, has ignored the UN's calls. Now with the OCHA documents made public, how will the Sri Lankan government react?

Footnote: As the NFF threatens to "surround" the UN in Colombo, supporters of the Sri Lankan government have written to the UN, with a copy to Inner City Press, asking that Inner City Press be "disbarred" for asking questions about government military action in Sri Lanka. How far *would* the UN go to placate the Sri Lankan government and its supporters?

Click [here for Inner City Press March 12 UN \(and AIG bailout\) debate](#)

Click [here for Inner City Press' Feb 26 UN debate](#)

Click [here for Feb. 12 debate on Sri Lanka](#)
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and this [October 17 debate, on Security Council and Obama and the UN.](#)

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Click [here](#) for a [Reuters AlertNet](#) piece by this correspondent about Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army. Click [here](#) for an earlier [Reuters AlertNet](#) piece about the Somali National Reconciliation Congress, and the UN's \$200,000 contribution from an undefined trust fund. [Video Analysis here](#)

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