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Bishop: Sri Lanka must acknowledge killing civilians

by Anto Akkara by Catholic News Service

BANGALORE, India -- The Sri Lankan government must acknowledge that it killed thousands of civilians in the past five months of the country's civil war, said a bishop from the affected region.

"The truth about violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, such as (forced) disappearances, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, bombing and shelling of civilian's spaces ... must be publicly acknowledged," Sri Lankan Bishop Rayappu Joseph of Mannar told a special government commission established to counter widespread criticism of gross human rights abuses in the final stage of the war, which ended in May 2009.

"Without addressing these needs," Joseph added, "people affected by the war will not be able to move toward reconciliation, and neither will they have any confidence or hope in any reconciliation process.

"We believe thousands of people have been killed in the last five months of the war and ... a large number of these people are from Mannar district," said the bishop, whose diocese includes 84,000 Catholics, overwhelmingly ethnic Tamil.

The bishop made several suggestions during his Jan. 8 deposition before the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission during its hearing in Mannar. Catholic News Service obtained a written copy of his remarks.

Joseph suggested an "independent special mechanism" to investigate forced disappearances of civilians, including two Catholic priests, and demanded a "comprehensive list of detainees" and death certificates for others as thousands of civilians continue to be listed as missing.

The bishop also presented lists of nearly 300 people who have been detained by the government without charge.

He said most of the 300,000 Tamils displaced by the war live under tarps; others live in makeshift and temporary houses.

Yet, he said, the government was imposing restrictions even on the church to get assistance to the displaced families, most of whom have been allowed to return to their villages a year after the war.

Pointing out that discrimination against minority Tamils was at the root of the ethnic conflict, Joseph said that "principle of power-sharing and rights of minorities must be legally entrenched in the constitution" of Sri Lanka.

Beginning in 1983, Tamils carried out a war for autonomy for ethnic Tamil majority areas in Sri Lanka's North and East; nearly 100,000 people were killed in the war.

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Ethnic Tamils account for 18 percent of Sri Lanka's 20 million people, while Sinhalese-speaking Buddhists account for 70 percent of the population.

Toward the end of the war, thousands of ethnic Tamil civilians were killed when Sri Lankan forces pounded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam, who mixed with fleeing Tamil civilians.

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