

Sri Lanka: Vanni mass grave's investigations stalled indefinitely due to lack of funds

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Investigations at the mass grave found in war-torn Vanni region ten months ago has ground to a halt due to the funds requested by an expert panel in order to resume the excavation work is yet to be approved.

Judicial Medical Officer (JMO) in charge of the excavation work, Kanagasabapathi Vasudewa, says that future investigations concerning the Kokkuthodavai mass grave requires an estimated amount of Rs. 13 million. Thus far, 40 complete skeletons have been unearthed from the mass grave.

The Mullaitivu Court was informed that the Justice Ministry has requested that the estimate be reviewed.

Attorney Shanthipragasam Niranjana told journalists that Mullaitivu District Secretariat's chief accountant Mylvanaagam Selvaratnam conveyed that request to court when the case relating to the Kokkuthodavai mass grave was taken up before Mullaitivu Magistrate Dharmalingam Pradeepan on Thursday (4th).

"Since a sub-surface scan revealed the existence of human skeletons under a road and there is a need to unearth them, the court was awaiting funds for this purpose. The Mullaitivu District Secretariat's chief accountant told the court the provided estimate requires 7% of the total fund allocation for the Justice Ministry, and that therefore, the ministry had requested this estimate to be reassessed and presented.

Local journalists say that representatives of the Office of Missing Persons (OMP) that vowed to provide funds, were also present in court.

Dr Vasudewa told journalists, that funds are short to conduct the relevant forensic tests on the skeletons already exhumed from the Kokkuthodavai mass grave.

Forensic archaeologist Prof. Raj Somadeva had told court that the skeletons unearthed from the mass grave belong to LTTE members who were buried in mid-1990s in a chaotic manner.

The 35-page interim report submitted to the Mullaitivu Court by Prof. Somadeva concludes that the bodies found in the Kokkuthodavai mass grave had been buried in the 1994-1996 period. At the time Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga ruled the country.

Meanwhile, Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) has revealed that during the period referred in the report, the area of the mass grave remained under the control of 6th 'Welioya' Brigade of the Sri Lanka army led by late Brigadier Janaka Perera before he was posted to Jaffna to lead Reserve Strike Force (53 Division).

"The 4th Battalion of the Gemunu Watch was stationed at the Kokkuthodavai camp under the

command of Lt. Col. Rohitha Wickrematilaka, who functioned as the battalion commander from February 1995 to November 1996," JDS added.

During a period of 21 days between September and November, 2023, 40 skeletons of men and women have been unearthed during the excavation work carried out in two phases with the participation of JMO Vasudewa. As per the key conclusions reached following the examination of the skeletons, the bodies belong to LTTE militants and they have been buried in a clandestine manner.

Prof. Somadeva's report says that the deceased had to face a firearm confrontation before losing their lives, and his interim report says that the burial of these militants did not take place before 1994 or after 1996.

Following a meeting held at the Mullaitivu Court on 29th November 2023 resulted in a decision to completely excavate the mass grave, it was decided to resume the halted excavation work on 1st March 2024.

A month later, the investigations are yet to get under way due to the shortage of funds from government authorities.

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