

The UN's 'grave failure' in Sri Lanka demands an answer

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It's been called Ban Ki-moon's Rwanda moment: a little-reported war three years ago on a tiny Indian Ocean island where tens of thousands of civilians were slaughtered, waiting for the United Nations to come and rescue them.

What happened in Sri Lanka in 2009 has come back to haunt the UN with the leak of an internal inquiry commissioned by the Secretary-General. The independent report concluded that the UN's own conduct during the final months of Sri Lanka's civil war marked a "grave failure." There was damning criticism of senior staff, who "simply did not perceive the prevention of killing of civilians as their responsibility."

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Would the entire report have seen the light of day if a draft hadn't been leaked to the BBC? A reluctant UN in New York had to publish the document, but chose to do so without its powerful executive summary that set the conflict in the context of post-9/11 global attitudes to terrorism

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that tragically skewed the reporting of the bloodshed. Internal communications show senior UN officials struggling to portray the proscribed terrorist group, the Tamil Tigers, as the ones primarily to blame for the killings.

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