

PUBLIC

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UA 116/09 **Fear for safety/Health concern**

SRI LANKA **Approximately 50,000 civilians in the 'No Fire Zone', north eastern Sri Lanka**

Approximately 50,000 civilians are trapped in the worsening humanitarian crisis in the Mullaitivu District of northern Sri Lanka. They lack food and medical care and are at grave risk of injury or death in the conflict between Sri Lankan government forces and an armed opposition group called the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The United Nations (UN) estimates that more than 6,500 civilians have died and 13,000 have been injured in the fighting since the start of the year. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the only aid agency with a permanent presence in the war zone, has described the situation as 'catastrophic'.

Civilians, including children, are at extreme risk as they are trapped and subjected to aerial bombardment by Sri Lankan government forces and shooting by the LTTE. The combat zone initially spanned a wide area of Mullaitivu District, but in February 2009, in response to pressure from the United Nations and other international bodies, the government created a 'No Fire Zone'. This is an area where civilians should have been safe.

However, as the government forces have taken what it claimed was LTTE held territory, the armed opposition moved into the 'No Fire Zone'. The zone continues to shrink on a daily basis and is limited to parts of the coastal area in Mullaitivu. The LTTE have prevented civilians from leaving to areas of safety outside the combat zone as it has forced them to stay at gunpoint. The LTTE has also used them to fight, build defences and act as human shields.

In February 2009, the ICRC reported on spiralling civilian casualties. Medical staff in the area report continuous indiscriminate firing into the zone by government forces. Hospitals have been targeted reportedly by government forces. Repeated denial of humanitarian access to the area has led to an acute shortage of medicine. Food security has worsened leading to cases of malnutrition.

In response to continued international pressure, on 27 April the Government of Sri Lanka pledged not to use heavy weaponry in the 'No Fire Zone'. However, according to medical staff in the zone there was continued shelling on 28 April with 204 injured civilians admitted to a health facility in the hamlet of Mullivakkal. Of these, 29 patients subsequently died.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE has been ongoing for decades. However, fighting intensified in north eastern Sri Lanka from July 2008 and developed into a high intensity conflict marked by grave violations of human rights law and war crimes.

In early 2009 up to quarter of a million people were trapped between government security forces and the LTTE. The Sri-Lankan government has repeatedly denied independent journalists or monitors to provide impartial and accurate assessments of the situation. As a result, almost total blackout of information has prevented the population of Sri Lanka and the world from knowing the full scale of the humanitarian crisis in the Wannai.

In September 2008 the government forced the withdrawal of all humanitarian agencies with the exception of the ICRC. It is the only aid agency with permanent, albeit limited, access and has since facilitated limited aid convoys to civilians with UN and ICRC help.

In April 2009, as fighting intensified and international pressure grew for a temporary humanitarian ceasefire, tens of thousands of civilians escaped to government held areas. There are now over 150,000 displaced persons in 20 transit camps across Vavuniya District. The Government of Sri Lanka maintained for months that the numbers of civilians trapped in the conflict zone was lower than aid agencies' estimates. As a result the government is not prepared to deal with the tens of thousands of civilians who have now crossed into Vavuniya District. Reports show that the "welfare villages" which are de facto detention centers established by the authorities are overcrowded and have inadequate facilities.

Away from the frontlines, freedom of expression is under severe threat in the country. As a result, the conflict is not fully reported within Sri Lanka and those who attempt to do so have frequently found themselves targeted by government authority.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

To Government of Sri-Lanka

- calling for an immediate end to artillery shelling by the Sri Lankan army in the 'No Fire Zone' in the north-east of the country;
- calling on the Sri Lankan government to allow full and unimpeded access for national and international humanitarian agencies to the north-east so that they can provide food, medicine and other vital humanitarian assistance to the civilian population;
- asking the government to provide guarantees of safe passage for national and international humanitarian agencies;
- calling on the Sri Lankan government to have a cessation of hostilities so that civilians can move to areas of safety;
- urging the Sri Lankan government to allow independent national and international observers, including non-governmental organizations, prompt and unhindered access throughout the island.
- urging the Sri Lankan government to ensure that the screening process is carried out in ways that guarantees the human rights and dignity of all those involved, and allow independent monitoring of the screening process;
- calling for anyone who is detained on suspicion of involvement with the LTTE to be promptly charged with a recognizable criminal offence and brought to justice in proceedings that meet international standards for fairness, without recourse of death penalty, or released.
- Adding that while in detention, individuals must not be held incommunicado or in secret or unofficial places of detention where they are vulnerable to extrajudicial executions, torture and enforced disappearance.

APPEALS TO:

President Mahinda Rajapaksa
Presidential Secretariat
Colombo 1
Sri Lanka

Fax: +94 11 2446657 or +94 11 2472100

Tratamiento: Your Excellency / Excelencia

To the LTTE:

- calling on the LTTE to allow civilians to move to areas of safety and to stop using civilians as a buffer between themselves and government forces.
- stop all direct or indiscriminate attacks against civilians, condemn all such attacks publicly and state that they will not be tolerated.
- end forced recruitment including recruitment of child soldiers and involuntary labor.

APPEALS TO: Please send emails for the LTTE to the following address: ltteps@gmail.com

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Sri Lanka accredited to your country

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 12 June 2009.

