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Sri Lanka: Government misrepresentations regarding the scale of the crisis

As the armed conflict appears to draw to a close in Sri Lanka, a humanitarian crisis is unfolding for the more than quarter of a million civilians now held by government forces in *de facto* internment camps. The government is not prepared to deal with food, water and shelter needs of the newly displaced as it has persistently downplayed the number of civilians trapped in areas previously under Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) control and the 'No Fire' Zone.

Despite United Nations' and Amnesty International warnings that more than 250,000 civilians were trapped in the conflict zone, the Government of Sri Lanka consistently claimed that 'no more' than 70,000 to 100,000 civilians were at risk. Now, with the civilians out of the conflict zone, more accurate numbers are available: According to a 20 May UN press briefing "Some 230,000 had been screened and registered and were currently accommodated in 41 sites spread across four districts. Another 50,000 people were undergoing screening and registration at various points and awaiting transportation to the sites"[1]

"The Sri Lankan government has consistently curtailed international assistance and monitoring based on assertions that it has the situation in hand," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific director. "But a quick look at their own statements shows a pattern of misrepresenting the facts. That's why it is so important to ensure that there are independent, international monitors who can provide an accurate picture of the situation on the ground."

[1] http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MYAI-7S94VQ?OpenDocument&rc=3&cc=lka

Number of civilians trapped in the war zone - Government of Sri Lanka Statements since January 2009

31 January 2009 - ***"True figure between 75,000 and 100,000"*** "….Though foreign news agencies and tribal media stooges of the 'Sri Lankan victim industry' make repetitive attempts to exaggerate the civilian numbers in the No Fire Zone as being over 250,000, defence observers citing ground sources and reliable information assert that the true figure may fluctuate around 75000 - 100,000 people on a high estimate…" **-Official Department of Defence Press Release**[2]	***5 May 2009 --*** ***– "250,000 Hostages…"*** ***After large waves of civilians began to flee the war zone, reports from the Ministry of Defence took on a different tone:*** "Hostage takings have been reported sporadically, throughout the world. However, none was even closer to the recent captivity of approximate of 250,000 of civilians by the Tamil Tiger terrorists (LTTE) in the north eastern jungles. Over the past three days 60,000 hostages were rescued by the Sri Lankan Forces" **-SL Ministry of Defence Report**[3]
17 February 2009 –	***19 May 2009 –***

"Between 50,000 and 70,000.." "Speaking about the civilian causality figures released by various sources, the Defence Secretary (Gotobhaya Rajapakse) has explained that the number of civilians trapped in the remaining LTTE hiding areas as well as the civilians casualties have been excessively exaggerated. He has said that the number of civilians trapped in the war zones is between 50,000- 70,000..." **-Official Department of Defence Press Release[4]**	***"rescuing over 210,000 civilians"*** In a speech at the G-11 summit, President Mahinda Rajapakse acknowledges the scale of the crisis: "My government's precise and well coordinated humanitarian operation has so far succeeded in rescuing over 210,000 civilians..." **-Speech by President Mahinda Rajapakse[5]**
18 February 2009 -- ***– "70,000 to be rescued.."*** In a brief to the diplomatic community in Colombo Foreign Minister Roghitha Bogollogama claimed: "the government has to continue the ongoing military operations in the North, more importantly, to rescue the nearly *70,000* who are held as hostage by the LTTE." **-From the Official Government of Sri Lanka website[6]**	***21 May 2009 –*** ***"more than 250,000 displaced people (IDPs)"*** The International Committee of the Red Cross issued a press release "according to government figures, there are more than 250,000 displaced people (IDPs) in some 20 camps"and Menik Farm alone, the biggest campsite, houses over 130,000 displaced people.[7]

[2] http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20090130_F01
[3] http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20090422_03
[4]http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/Current_Affairs/ca200902/20090217civilian_safety_top_priority.html
[5] http://www.president.gov.lk/speech_New.asp?Id=73
[6]http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/Current_Affairs/ca200902/20090218fm_invites_diplomatic_corps_visit_sl.htm
[7] http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/sri-lanka-interview-200509