

AI Index: PRE 01/294/2008
19 November 2008

Sri Lanka: Hundreds of thousands trapped in the Wannu need urgent shelters

The Sri Lankan government must immediately end its policy of blocking humanitarian aid needed to reach an estimated 300,000 displaced people in the Wannu region of northern Sri Lanka, Amnesty International said today.

Thousands of people displaced by the conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and government forces are currently in desperate need of shelter, food and sanitation. As the north-east monsoon season approaches, only 2,100 temporary shelters for 4,000 families have been provided, leaving at least 20,000 families in need of protection from the elements.

Around two thirds of the civilian population of the Wannu region have been forced out of their homes and are living in camps in areas controlled by the LTTE. They are trapped in the north-eastern area of Sri Lanka known as the Wannu, the last stronghold of the Tamil Tigers who impose a strict pass system that prevents them from moving to safer places. These measures seem designed, in part, to use civilians as a deliberate buffer against government forces.

Amnesty International is calling on the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to allow international monitors to assess the needs of the thousands of people trapped in the Wannu and to ensure proper distribution of food and other resources. The Indian government has promised food aid through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in recognition of the severity of the situation but without non-government distribution, there is no way of establishing if the aid is reaching those most in need.

“More than 300,000 people face the next few months crowded together in temporary shelters, surrounded by mud, with no promise of regular access to food or adequate sanitation. Our information indicates that the situation in Wannu is rapidly becoming critical, despite the government’s statements that it is coping,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia Pacific Director.

The Sri Lankan government states that it is distributing aid to displaced families but Amnesty International believes that the government lacks the capacity to uphold international human rights standards and ensure the support is provided to protect the lives of thousands of people.

Amnesty International has testimony and visual evidence which highlight the problems in Wannu, including:

Shelters - government forces refused to allow a United Nations convoy with shelter kits into the region on 3 November despite reports of thousands of families in need of shelter, according to government agents for Kilinochchi and Mulaithivu. Accurate figures are not possible because of lack of independent monitoring.

Sanitation – ninety five per cent of the displaced in the Wannu do not have proper latrine facilities, and local authorities have estimated 5,230 temporary toilets are needed.

A government-enforced blockade on cement is further preventing the construction of proper toilet facilities.

This shortage - combined with acute shortage of safe drinking water – is creating a high risk of outbreak of water-borne ailments, including diarrhoea.

Food - a food convoy was allowed into the Wannu region on 3 November but photos taken when the aid agencies pulled out and subsequently provided to Amnesty International, show that people are already facing malnutrition and the threat of disease.

According to an analysis of the World Food Programme (WFP) data, displaced people in the Wannu are receiving an average of 1,000 calories each per day. This is less than half the 2,100 calories required daily, as recommended by the WFP. These figures are based on weekly convoys of 438 tonnes of food aid provided for an UN-estimated 230,000 displaced people. Lactating mothers and infants are especially vulnerable as they are not receiving adequate supplementary food to meet their specific needs.

It is estimated that approximately 35 per cent of the Wannu's rice and vegetable producing areas are located in the conflict zone and are no longer accessible. Displaced people are already reported to be pawning or selling jewellery to buy basic food items.

Sam Zarifi said: “There is a huge gap between what the government is saying and how the situation seems to be developing on the ground. Sri Lanka's leaders must ensure that there is international involvement in the distribution of aid without discrimination, wherever people are in need.

“Without independent monitors or international agencies on the ground, there is no opportunity to conduct a meaningful needs assessment of displaced families. Before the evacuation of international staff, UN agencies co-ordinated and supervised support in the region. There is now no way of verifying government claims about aid reaching these families in need and our evidence strongly suggests that not enough is being done.”

Amnesty International calls on the government of Sri Lanka to give assurances to international agencies of unimpeded humanitarian access and aid distribution. The organization also calls on the LTTE to ensure freedom of movement for civilians and stop preventing people from moving to safer places.

“The abuses carried out by the LTTE make our call for international monitors to be allowed to visit conflict-affected areas even more pressing. These families must not be forgotten and left to suffer in a war zone,” said Sam Zarifi.

Background

The security situation for civilians including displaced people has worsened since May when conflict intensified in Wannu.

The LTTE has blocked freedom of movement for the displaced in the Wannu. The LTTE appears to have no capacity to provide safety, or food or shelter and yet prevent families from moving to safer areas.

The LTTE has a history of silencing dissent in Wannu and treating conscientious objectors badly. Recent reports highlight a large camp at Moonru-Murippu in which, following its takeover by government forces, it was revealed that conscripted people who refused to fight were locked into metal cages, with pointed wires extending inside. The pointed wires ensured that they had to stand in a bent position and were pricked if they tried to move. They were let out only when they agreed to the LTTE's demands.

The government asked UN aid agencies to leave Wannu with a government directive dated 5 September and

the last agency left on 16 September.

Media access to war-affected areas is heavily restricted and journalists have to rely on information disseminated by the conflicting parties. The media is constantly threatened by all parties to the conflict, in an effort to curtail independent and critical reporting.

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