

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## OPEN LETTER

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### Open letter to Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon urging protection for civilians in the Wannai, Sri Lanka

Mr. Shivshankar Menon  
Secretary  
Ministry for External Affairs  
South Block, Raisina Hill,  
New Delhi – 110011  
India

Dear Mr. Menon

On the occasion of your upcoming visit to Sri Lanka, Amnesty International calls on you to raise, with your Sri Lankan counterparts, concerns about the safety of civilians trapped in the Wannai, as government forces close in on Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) bases in the north-eastern part of the island. We also ask that you discuss the general deterioration of human rights in the country, even in areas not directly affected by the conflict.

More than a quarter of a million people, mostly Tamils, face immense hardship and are running out of safe space in the face of intensified fighting between the two sides. This population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is trapped between the approaching Sri Lankan security forces and the LTTE, which has imposed restrictions on their ability to leave and is using them as an involuntary pool of recruits and labourers. With the Sri Lankan government's recent recapture of Killinochchi, hundreds of thousands of people have been compressed into a smaller area and are increasingly vulnerable. As the fighting encroaches on the trapped population, there are fears of a further mass exodus of civilians.

#### **Lack of protection to civilians during fighting**

Given the restrictions imposed by both sides on independent media and humanitarian aid workers, there is little independent verification of conditions in the conflict area. Available information suggests that over 300,000 people are experiencing tremendous insecurity and food shortages aggravated by the fact that many of these families have sold most of their possessions to cope with multiple displacements.

In November 2008, Amnesty International drew attention to acute food and shelter shortages facing this population (Amnesty International, *Sri Lankan government must act now to protect 300,000 displaced*, 19 November 2008). At the time, the organisation welcomed the food supplies that were sent by the Indian authorities. As humanitarian supplies, including those sent by the Indian government, have since dwindled, aid workers express fears that many of the displaced are vulnerable to potential public health problems and are receiving far less calories

than the daily recommended allowance. Also, civilians injured in the fighting cannot be transported outside the Wannu for urgent treatment due to road closures by the security forces.

As hostilities have intensified, the LTTE have stepped up its recruitment, especially of younger people. LTTE continue to hinder people from moving to safer places by imposing a strict pass system. In some instances they have forced family members to stay behind to ensure the return of the rest of the family.

Despite assurances by the government of Sri Lanka that the situation is under control, there is evidence to suggest that the authorities lack the capacity to provide the required humanitarian relief to displaced people. Humanitarian access to the Wannu continues to be restricted. Only government-approved food convoys are allowed to enter the area since the authorities ordered the United Nations, and nearly all humanitarian agencies, to withdraw from the Wannu on 9 September 2008.

On 29 and 30 December 2008, an Inter-Agency support mission accompanied the World Food Program-led convoy in order to monitor implementation of United Nations (UN) funded programmes and conduct a needs assessment. The mission noted increased vulnerability of the civilian population due to several factors including: ongoing fighting, new and repeated displacements into an increasingly compressed area, flood damage and reduced capacity and material to address urgent shelter and sanitation needs.

#### **Attacks on media**

Away from the front lines, the general human rights situation in government-controlled areas has deteriorated (Amnesty International has previously criticized the LTTE for severely curtailing civil and political rights in areas under their control). Amnesty International is appalled at the increasing instances of attacks on the media, including the recent assassination of the editor of the *Sunday Leader*, Lasantha Wickramatunge in Colombo and attack on the privately owned Maharaja television/MTV studios in Colombo which was ransacked by a gang who used claymore bombs to damage property.

During your upcoming discussions with the Government of Sri Lanka, you should pay special attention to the severe difficulties facing the people of Sri Lanka. Amnesty International urges you:

- To raise issue of the civilian protection and press for urgently needed humanitarian assistance to reach civilians who are trapped between the two sides. Pressure must also be put on the LTTE to allow free passage of displaced families from the Wannu with immediate effect.

- To press for international monitors to assess the humanitarian needs of quarter of a million people trapped in the Wannu and to ensure proper distribution of food and other humanitarian assistance, particularly as the fighting approaches the trapped civilian population.

- To raise the issue of attacks on the media and press for impartial investigation into the same.

Thank you for your consideration for the above recommendations, and we look forward to your response at the earliest.

Sincerely,

Sam Zarifi  
Program Director  
Asia-Pacific Program

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Public Document

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