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UN Security Council: Demand immediate access and accountability in Sri Lanka

Ahead of Friday's UN Security Council briefing by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on his visit to Sri Lanka, Amnesty International urged the Security Council to demand that Sri Lanka provide full access to humanitarian organizations and establish an international inquiry into possible war crimes committed by all sides to the conflict.

"It is unacceptable for the Sri Lankan government to deny full and unimpeded access to the UN and other humanitarian and human rights organizations," said Yvonne Terlingen, Head of Amnesty International's Office at the UN.

"The UN Secretary-General accepted assurances from the government on access for humanitarian agencies while he was in Sri Lanka and with each day that passes the credibility of the UN is eroded."

In a joint statement with the UN Secretary-General the Sri Lankan government professed its "strongest commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights."

Nearly 300,000 people displaced by the conflict are now held in military-run internment camps without access to basic needs or protection from serious human rights violations. Amnesty International has received reports of family members searching in vain for relatives forcibly separated from them after they exited the conflict area. Young men are also reportedly taken away from the camps by pro-government paramilitary forces and are at high risk of torture and other ill treatment or enforced disappearance.

The Sri Lankan government is also detaining some 9,000 suspected Tamil Tigers (LTTE) without legal safeguards or notice to their families.

Sri Lankan authorities have imposed numerous obstacles in the way of humanitarian aid organizations, including preventing them from transporting goods into the camps with more than one vehicle at a time. The UN stressed on 1 June that "more access is needed."

"The Security Council must demand that the government of Sri Lanka gives immediate and full access to the UN, and other humanitarian and human rights organizations," said Yvonne Terlingen. "In addition, the government must facilitate the deployment of UN human rights monitors to provide safeguards against violations."

Amnesty International is also calling on the Security Council to demand an international, independent inquiry into the evidence of serious abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law, including war crimes, perpetrated by the Tamil Tigers and the government. Alternatively, the UN Secretary-General should

establish such an investigation under his own mandate.

The need for an international inquiry is underscored by the lack of clarity about the number of civilians killed during the fighting. There is evidence, including in the UN's own data, that as many as 20,000 people, many of them civilians, may have been killed during the conflict. The UN Secretary-General has called these figures "unacceptably high".

According to testimonies, the LTTE were responsible for using civilians as human shields, but there is evidence that most civilians were killed as a result of shelling. The Sri Lankan military continued to use heavy weapons despite promising on 24 February and again on 27 April that it would stop using them. The firing of artillery into an area with a high concentration of civilians (such as the "no-fire zone" in the final weeks of the military campaign) violates international humanitarian law.

For a full text of Amnesty International's letter to the Security Council see <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/IO40/005/2009/en>