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Sri Lanka: LTTE, government endangering lives of tens of thousands of newly displaced around Wannai

Thousands of families who fled the recent fighting between Sri Lankan forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) must be allowed to move to safer areas and to receive necessary humanitarian assistance, Amnesty International said today.

“These people are running out of places to go and basic necessities,” said Yolanda Foster, Amnesty International’s Sri Lanka researcher. “The Tigers are keeping them in harm’s way and the government is not doing enough to ensure they receive essential assistance.”

Government aerial bombardment and artillery shelling since May has forced more than 70,000 people to flee their homes, primarily in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts.

Amnesty International has established that around a third of these families are living in the open air with no shelter. Many cannot receive food, tarpaulin for temporary shelters and fuel because of a lack of access into LTTE-controlled areas and restrictions on goods going through Ommathurai - the crossing point between government-controlled territory and that held by the LTTE. Some families have been forced to move several times.

In the LTTE-controlled Wannai area, the Tigers have hindered thousands of families from moving to safer places by imposing a strict pass system and, in some instances, forcing some family members to stay behind to ensure the return of the rest of the family. These measures seem designed in part to use civilians as a buffer against government forces -- a serious violation of international humanitarian law. The LTTE has also engaged in forced recruitment.

Lack of cement to build adequate toilets and washrooms has forced people to use open bathing facilities. The lack of adequate privacy for women and girls has led to a notable increase in reports of sexual and gender based violence.

Amnesty International has also received reports that the government is housing those who have been able to leave LTTE areas in temporary shelters that often operate as de facto detention centres. Witnesses from Kalimoddi camp in Mannar district told Amnesty International that more than 200 families who are held there cannot exit the camp for any reason (except to go to school) without obtaining a pass from the government’s security forces.

“Both sides to this long conflict have again shown that they will jeopardize the lives of thousands of ordinary people in the pursuit of military objectives,” said Yolanda Foster. “In the absence of independent international monitors, Sri Lankan civilians lack protection and remain at the mercy of two forces with long records of abuse.”

Background

The Sri Lankan military has launched a major offensive to reclaim areas of the north and east previously controlled by the LTTE. Families have been multiply displaced. According to UNHCR, as of 30 June, there are some 467,000 individuals displaced by conflict in Sri Lanka’s north and east. This figure includes an estimated 194,900 persons who were displaced after fighting intensified in April 2006.