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## **Sri Lanka: Blocking aid workers endangers trapped civilians**

The Sri Lankan government's order for United Nations (UN) and non-governmental aid workers to leave the war-torn northern Wanni region could further endanger tens of thousands of displaced persons trapped between the two parties to the conflict, Amnesty International warned.

National staff of international aid agencies now left behind in the Wanni fear that the withdrawal of international staff will make them more vulnerable to abuses by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Amnesty International has received credible reports that the LTTE has prevented civilians from moving to safer places in government controlled areas. The LTTE is also actively recruiting minors in camps for the newly displaced.

"Aid agencies provided a lifeline to tens of thousands of trapped civilians. If aid workers are pulled out of the region, food, shelter and sanitation supplies have even less chance of reaching civilians most in need," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific Director.

Aid workers in the Wanni told Amnesty International that they feared the government lacks the capacity to provide basic essentials and safety for those who have had to flee their homes as fighting has intensified between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE. Seven international aid agencies, including the World Food Program, were providing emergency food assistance in the Wanni.

"The Sri Lankan government has now assumed total responsibility for ensuring the needs of the civilian population affected by the hostilities are met. If the government is telling aid workers to pull back, then it must show it has the capacity to feed and protect its own citizens left behind," said Sam Zarifi.

Amnesty International called on the Sri Lankan government to allow independent international monitors into the Wanni to oversee and ensure that convoys with food, medical and other essential supplies enter into the area, as well oversee the distribution of such supplies.

"Independent monitors are essential to help ensure that basic necessities are reaching those in need, without discrimination. Without independent monitors in the region, there will be a complete void of information about any casualties or the state of shelters," said Sam Zarifi.

Despite government claims about setting up humanitarian corridors allowing for the safe passage of civilians out of the Wanni, Amnesty International has only received reports of unrestricted passage through the Omanthai checkpoint. Under international law, the government should ensure that people know where these corridors are and how they can reach them.

### **Background**

The government announced yesterday, 8 September, that it could no longer ensure the safety of aid workers in the area and requested that United Nations and humanitarian agencies staff move out to government-controlled territory.

Under international humanitarian law, both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE are obliged to treat those not taking active part in the hostilities humanely at all times, and without discrimination. In addition to prohibiting directing attacks at such people or carrying out indiscriminate attacks, this provision includes the obligation to ensure that humanitarian supplies reach all of those who need it.

The United Nations has begun shifting international workers from Kilinochchi to government-controlled Vavuniya. The International Committee of the Red Cross has issued a statement that it plans to continue assisting those in need, regardless of location.

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 displaced several times while fleeing from aerial bombardment by government forces.