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Sri Lanka: Government and Tamil Tigers violating laws of war

Reports emerging from Sri Lanka suggest that government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are violating the laws of war by targeting civilians and preventing them from escaping to safety.

Amnesty International has received information that the LTTE has, in at least one instance, prevented injured civilians from moving to safer areas or accessing medical care, an act that could constitute a war crime.

“Recent fighting has placed more than a quarter of a million civilians at great risk. People displaced by the conflict are experiencing acute shortages of humanitarian aid, especially food, shelter and medical care. There has been no food convoy in the area since 16 January,” said Yolanda Foster, Amnesty International’s Sri Lanka researcher.

The Government of Sri Lanka is carrying out military operations in areas with a civilian population. The aerial and artillery bombardment has reportedly led to civilian deaths, injuries, the destruction of property and mass displacement.

Sri Lankan government forces have pushed the Tamil Tigers out of all major urban areas they had held for nearly a decade and into a small pocket of land. More than 300,000 civilians who have fled the oncoming government troops are also trapped in this small area. They have been displaced multiple times and are increasingly vulnerable as fighting moves closer.

Hundreds of people have been killed or injured and such medical care as has been available is threatened due to danger to the few health workers and damage to hospitals.

The government had declared “safe zones” to allow civilians to seek shelter, but information made available to Amnesty International indicates that several civilians in the so-called safe zone have been killed or sustained injuries as a result of artillery bombardment.

A doctor working in a hospital in a “safe zone” says that about 1,000 shells fell around the hospital.

A convoy of 24 vehicles, arranged by the Red Cross and the UN to transport up to 300 wounded people, including 50 children, was stopped from leaving the area by the LTTE.

The UN says it will attempt to help evacuate the wounded for a second time, if permission is granted by LTTE and if a lull in the fighting permits. They hope to cross the frontline at midday Thursday.

Targeting civilians and carrying out indiscriminate attacks by any party to the conflict violates international humanitarian law.

“The immediate priority is medical attention for the seriously wounded. The Tamil Tigers must let injured civilians go” says Yolanda Foster, “Preventing civilians from accessing medical care constitutes a war crime.”