

AI Index: PRE 01/117/2009
26 March 2009

Sri Lanka: Thousands of civilians under attack as fighting intensifies

Tens of thousands of people, trapped in 'safe zones' in the north eastern Wanni region are at increased risk from the escalation in attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, Amnesty International said today.

As the fighting intensifies and the number of casualties goes up, Amnesty International called for an immediate humanitarian truce, to allow aid to reach trapped civilians and ensure the safe passage for all those that wish to leave. The organization also called on the United Nations and international donors to put pressure on Sri Lanka to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access to camps for the displaced people in the region.

"The deliberate firing on civilians by either side constitutes a war crime," said Sam Zarifi, Director of the Asia Pacific region at Amnesty International. "We cannot stress enough the importance of an immediate pause to allow the displaced to leave before thousands more are killed. The UN and international donors must put pressure on both parties to end this major humanitarian catastrophe."

The organization has received credible and consistent reports that the LTTE has forcibly displaced civilians and pushed them into areas under their control in the Wanni, where they are effectively held hostage and used as a buffer against the Sri Lankan armed forces – a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. Most independent observers estimate there are between 150,000 to 200,000 civilians trapped in the midst of the heavy fighting. The LTTE is also reported to have deliberately attacked civilians that have tried to escape from areas under their control.

The Sri Lankan government has intensified the suffering of the displaced people by cutting off international humanitarian assistance to a region where there are no longer any functioning hospitals.

Those people that risk their lives and flee face further ordeals when they enter government-controlled areas. Amnesty International has received information that the government is using the screening process at checkpoints and in transitional "welfare villages" as an excuse to discriminate against large groups of ethnic Tamils and to detain families for indefinite periods of time.

Reports show that the "welfare villages" established by the authorities are overcrowded and have inadequate facilities. In camps in Vavuniya and Jaffna the displaced are held in de facto detention, not being allowed to leave. There is also a continued military presence inside the camps which puts the civilians at further risk.

"The Sri Lankan government's attitude so far has been to seek international assistance while rejecting international standards or scrutiny" said Sam Zarifi. "The United Nations and donor government must ensure

Sri Lanka acts on its obligations and ends the discrimination and suffering of the displaced people.”

To address the human rights crisis in the Wanni region, Amnesty International urges:

- The Tamil Tigers to allow all civilians to leave the conflict area and any parties in a position to exercise influence over the Tamil Tigers should urge them to do that;
- The Sri Lankan government to ensure that civilians trapped in the conflict area receive sufficient humanitarian assistance, while those civilians who seek to leave have safe passage out of the conflict zone;
- The Sri Lankan government to ensure that displaced people receive adequate shelter and assistance, and are allowed to resettle quickly and voluntarily, in conformity with international standards;
- Sri Lanka’s international donors, including the UN, to ensure that the assistance they provide is only used when international human rights law and standards are met, and cannot be used to support abusive government policies.

A briefing paper from Amnesty International that documents the current human rights crisis in Sri Lanka is available from Amnesty International’s press office.