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Sri Lanka: UN must publicize civilian casualty figures

The United Nations must immediately publicize its estimate of the number of civilians killed by the two sides in the final weeks of fighting in Sri Lanka, Amnesty International said.

An investigation by the Times newspaper in Britain, drawing on confidential UN sources, stated that more than 20,000 civilians were killed in the last few weeks of the conflict, and suggested that most of them were killed as a result of shelling by the Sri Lankan government.

“Amnesty International received consistent testimony indicating that war crimes were committed by both sides in the conflict, and has called for an independent international investigation,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Director. “The Times’ report underscores the need for this investigation and the UN should do everything it can to determine the truth about the ‘bloodbath’ that occurred in northeast Sri Lanka.”

On Wednesday, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution that ignored the plight of more than a quarter of a million displaced Sri Lankans now confined in internment camps by the Sri Lankan military. The resolution failed to call for a fact-finding mission to inquire into allegations of serious violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law by Sri Lankan forces and by the Tamil Tigers (LTTE).

Amnesty International continues to receive consistent reports of widespread and serious human rights violations facing the displaced people, including enforced disappearance, extrajudicial executions, torture and other ill-treatment, forced recruitment by paramilitary groups and sexual violence.

“The UN must address the war crimes and grave human rights violations that have occurred - and could still be occurring - in Sri Lanka,” Sam Zarifi said. “The Human Rights Council’s decision not to call for specific measures to protect Sri Lankans made a mockery of the Council, but it doesn’t mean the end of the international community’s responsibility to respond to this ongoing crisis.”

Despite repeated calls and the gravity of the situation, the Sri Lankan government continues to restrict access to the camps by international humanitarian organizations, including the UN and the Red Cross (ICRC).

Amnesty International acknowledges the importance of the role of the international community in supporting the Sri Lankan people through providing humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, health care and returning home displaced civilians. These efforts, however, also need to be accompanied by specific measures to ensure respect for the full range of the human rights.

“There are many cruel similarities in the suffering of the Palestinian civilians who were trapped in Gaza during the Israeli operation in December and January and the Sri Lankan civilians who were trapped in the so called ‘no-fire zone’,” said Sam Zarifi. “The Human Rights Council established a fact-finding mission which will now look at violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by both sides in Gaza. By not establishing a similar fact-finding mission for Sri Lanka, the Human Rights Council has demonstrated deplorable selectivity and double standards.”