

SRI LANKA

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FIGHTING IN NORTH (2): “PRESSING APPEAL” OF POPE FOR SAFETY OF CIVILIANS AND PEACE

 Church and Mission, Standard

Pope Benedict XVI launched an appeal today at the end of the general audience to both sides in conflict in Sri Lanka for the safety of the civilians. The Pontiff expressed serious concern over the situation in the nation: “The increasing cruelty of the conflict and growing number of innocent victims pushes me to make a pressing appeal to the fighters to respect the humanitarian law and the populations’ freedom of movement”. Pope Benedict called on the sides to do everything possible “to guarantee assistance to civilians and the wounded, and to ensure that their urgent medical and food needs are met”. International bodies, aid agencies and the Church of Sri Lanka have strongly denounced the fact that civilians are trapped in the area of the fighting, isolated from medical assistance and under indiscriminate bombings. The Pope invoked Our Lady of Madhu, venerated by Catholics but also other faiths in the nation (Buddhists, Hindu and Muslims) so that “peace and reconciliation may soon be restored”. Caritas International today in a statement called for an immediate end to the hostilities, the protection of civilians caught in the crossfire and for all sides must pursue a negotiated peace settlement: “Aid agencies need to be able to reach innocent civilians who are suffering terribly due to the heavy fighting. We need to be able to reach them to provide medical and other humanitarian assistance”, said Caritas Sri Lanka Director Fr. Damian Fernando. “All sides of the conflict have the responsibility under international law to safeguard the lives of civilians”, Caritas International Secretary-General Lesley-Anne Knight had said after a visit in Sri Lanka in December, adding that “the international community must mobilise to put pressure on both sides for an end to hostilities otherwise we will be facing a humanitarian catastrophe”.