

February 13, 2009

Hillary Rodham Clinton  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State

Dear Secretary Clinton,

We are writing to add our voices of concern and outrage over the humanitarian tragedy playing itself out in northern Sri Lanka.

When violence endangered the civilian population in Gaza, the news went out all over the world. Unfortunately, a catastrophe, no less appalling, is taking place in Sri Lanka. Yet this tragedy has received a fraction of the international media attention given to places such as Darfur, Gaza or the Congo, allowing the violence to continue with impunity.

The International Committee of the Red Cross reports that as many as 250,000 civilians are trapped between the LTTE who are accused of using the people as human shields and government forces that are bombing and shelling this shrinking enclave with little regard to the cost in noncombatant casualties. No one knows the precise numbers of deaths and injuries because the government has refused independent international observers access to the area and has silenced the national media through various forms of violence and intimidation.

Credible sources report the shelling of hospitals, civilians being fired upon while trying to reach so-called safe zones, life-threatening lack of food, medical supplies, shelter and sanitation. It is also reported that Tamil civilians who do evacuate the area are treated as captured enemy, leaving those in the combat zone mistrustful of the Sri Lankan Government's entreaties to make their way to safe zones. Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defense has stated its refusal to ensure the safety and protection of civilians who do not move to government "Safety Zones". But it is well known that the people are being prevented from leaving by the LTTE. As Human Rights Watch notes, "Disregarding the distinction between civilians and combatants, violates a fundamental principle of the laws of war. Combatants who order or conduct deliberate or indiscriminate attacks against civilians are responsible for war crimes."

We appreciate the public statement you issued together with UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband. However, each day brings news of more deaths from bombing and a continued disregard for international humanitarian law.

We would ask you to consider explicit sanctions against the government of Sri Lanka if it does not agree immediately to a ceasefire and to allow the UN and the ICRC to carry out an evacuation operation. The UN must be able to specify the conditions and modalities under which such an operation is to be implemented. In addition, we urge you to call on Ambassador Susan Rice to request an immediate discussion in the UN Security Council of the situation in Sri Lanka

This is an opportunity for the new administration to reassert this country's moral leadership on behalf of desperately vulnerable people.

Thank you for your attention to our shared concerns.

Sincerely yours,

Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon  
General Secretary  
National Council of Churches USA

Rev. Dr. Paul F. Jahn  
Chairman  
U.S. NGO Forum on Sri Lanka

Rev. Dr. Richard L. Hamm  
former General Minister and President  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada

Fr. Louis Lougen, OMI  
Provincial, US Province  
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate

Rev. John H. Thomas  
General Minister and President  
United Church of Christ