

**FRANCISCANS INTERNATIONAL EXPRESSES DEEP CONCERN OVER THE SITUATION OF
INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA**

Geneva, 27 January 2009

Franciscans International expresses deep concern over the situation faced by more than 350,000 Tamil civilians who are trapped in the Northern region of Vanni. The ongoing conflict between Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Northern Sri Lanka has pushed civilians into a very small area surrounded by fighting.

Many civilians are victims of artillery shelling, aerial bombings and claymore mine attacks from Governmental and LTTE forces. Heavy bombardments in the area have made the delivery of food supplies, as well as of emergency medical supplies almost impossible due to the ongoing fighting. This has caused acute food shortages in the region.

The urgent need for children, women and elderly adults to leave the area has become an absolute priority to ensure their safety. Local actors have urged the Government to open and respect a safe corridor without delay. This would enable all civilians trapped within the zone of hostilities to access safer zones beyond the area of conflict and humanitarian actors would be able to access the safe passage and treat civilians in need.

Civilians escaping the conflict zone who manage to cross over to government-controlled areas are treated by Security Forces as LTTE suspects and are kept in camps. The government should ensure that they are treated humanely; particular attention should be given to the prevention of further violence and the ill-treatment of civilians who have reached these camps.

In September 2008, UN agencies and NGOs present in the Vanni, were requested to leave the region by the Sri Lankan government; only the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was granted permission to remain in the region. The government should assume its responsibility and ensure that the needs of the affected civilian population are met, including the prompt delivery of food and medical supplies. Finally, the government should also allow humanitarian agencies to return to the area in order to continue providing humanitarian relief for vulnerable civilians.

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