

Oblates of Mary Immaculate  
Via Aurelia 290  
00165, Rome, Italy

## OPEN LETTER

### **TO: His Excellency the President of Sri Lanka and the leadership of the LTTE**

The undersigned is a citizen of Sri Lanka who is extremely concerned about the current plight of over one *hundred thousand* civilians trapped between the security forces of the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE.

We appreciate the Government's right and duty to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka and its people. We understand that the Government considers its current military initiatives integral to the fulfillment of this right and duty. We also understand that the Government has stated that a primary objective of its ongoing military initiatives is the liberation of the civilian populace in the conflict zones.

We also note that a primary stated intention of the LTTE in carrying out its armed initiatives is the securing of self-determination for the Tamil people of Sri Lanka.

In this context, **we write *on behalf of the civilians presently trapped within the conflict zones – because they are all Sri Lankans and fellow citizens who have been rendered voiceless by their present plight.*** We therefore trust that you will take due and serious note of these our concerns.

*We perceive the urgent needs of these civilians to be the following:*

- To be safeguarded from being subjected to crossfire
- To be provided with medical aid and assistance for those who are injured, ill or otherwise indisposed
- To be supplied with food and other facilities fundamental for survival
- To be granted leave as well as transportation means to be evacuated from conflict areas
- To be released from conscription and forced labour
- To be assured of safety, security and dignity when they relocate

Both Your Excellency and you, the leaders of the LTTE, have asserted that you are striving through military means to redress the past grievances and ensure the future prosperity of the very people who are presently undergoing abject hardship as a result of your respective liberation campaigns.

Therefore, we feel it is imperative that *urgent and immediate* steps be taken by you to safeguard the right of all affected civilians to safety, security, the freedom of movement and the freedom to choose one's residence. As citizens, it is our responsibility to ensure what is right and dutiful is achieved for our fellow Sri Lankans.

#### **OUR PLEA TO THE PRESIDENT**

- Consider civilians in conflict zones as hostages of the LTTE
- Treat such civilians in a manner you and your government would treat any Sri Lankan citizen held hostage by a third party
- Include any hospitals as part of a safe zone,
- Increase the number, scope and extent of safe zones with adequate medical facilities and other essential services in keeping with the Geneva Convention
- Ensure that no military initiatives are carried out by the security forces that may even inadvertently target such safe zones
- Facilitate the movement of civilians from conflict areas to safe zones, with the aid and assistance of local and international humanitarian organisations
- Facilitate independent reporting with a view to winning the trust and confidence of those within conflict areas, and establishing the Government's bona fides
- Allay the fears of any civilians wishing to leave the conflict areas for safe zones, so that they may avail themselves of the fundamental rights of Sri Lankan citizens
- Treat all civilians who seek refuge in non-conflict areas as you would any other citizen

#### **OUR PLEA TO THE LTTE**

- Cease and desist from holding civilians hostage and endangering their lives to protect your cadre and strategic positions, as has been observed and intimated by United Nations organisations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Human Rights Watch
- Refrain from using civilians as human shields in your armed initiatives
- Refrain from hindering the free passage of civilians wishing to leave the conflict zones, especially as their continued presence within such areas against their wishes would be contrary to your stated intention of safeguarding the people from harm
- Facilitate the evacuation of civilians from within the conflict areas to safe zones
- Permit international agencies to enter conflict areas and transport all civilians desirous of leaving to safety – without restrictions, threats or compromising their security

In conclusion, we reiterate that political prerogatives and matters of policy are of secondary interest to us. We strongly feel, that what matters most at this time, is that *the citizens of Sri Lanka who have been and continue to be subject to grave danger, trauma and intolerable indignities are rescued from their plight by you*, the only parties who have it in their power to ensure that the people they have vowed to protect are, indeed, safeguarded.

In earnest anticipation of a swift and appropriate response, I am

Yours truly,

Rev. Oswald B. Firth, omi

Assistant General

Oblates of Mary Immaculate – Rome, Italy