

The Honorable Susan Rice
Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations
140 East 45th Street
New York, NY 10017

Dear Madame Ambassador:

We write with great concern regarding the grave humanitarian crisis in northern Sri Lanka. Human rights groups report that up to 200,000 civilians are trapped in the Vanni region, amid fighting between Sri Lankan Government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Most have been cut off from outside food and medical supplies for weeks and their lives are threatened both by the fighting and their humanitarian needs. Human Rights Watch reports that 2,000 Tamil civilians have been killed since January, and more than 7,000 Tamil civilians have been wounded.

We appreciate the good work of the Obama Administration, in concert with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to arrange delivery of humanitarian aid and to press for protection of noncombatants in northern Sri Lanka. At the same time, given the gravity of the situation, we urge that you engage the Sri Lankan Government at senior levels and press for full protection of all civilians, authorization for active involvement by United Nations agencies in humanitarian relief, and progress toward a political settlement that grants ethnic Tamils participation in national governance and an end to discrimination against them.

Your active leadership at the United Nations at this critical time can help save thousands of lives and make progress toward a sustainable political settlement to end the horrific cycle of violence in the country. We urge increased action to mobilize the international community to guarantee the safety of all civilian noncombatants and to provide increased food and medical supplies to head off further deaths and suffering. We note that UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief John Holmes recently visited Sri Lanka and called for immediate progress on the humanitarian situation. We urge you to continue to press other UN Security Council members to bring the crisis in Sri Lanka to the agenda of the Security Council.

Also of great concern to us are the internment camps set up by the Sri Lankan Government to relocate Tamil civilians from the conflict zone. Providing refuge for noncombatants seeking to flee the violence is clearly a priority, but as Human Rights Watch noted in its Feb. 20 report, these camps are “internment centers masquerading as ‘welfare villages’...where entire families detained in these military-controlled, barbed-wire camps are denied their liberty and freedom of movement.” Paramilitaries operate inside the camps, and numerous women, men and children have been attacked or forcibly taken from them, and some remain missing. This is part of a disturbing trend, with Sri Lanka having the highest rate of state-sponsored “disappearances” in the world,

according to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. All civilians in the camps need to be given the freedom to remain in the camps or to return home when they wish, and to be treated in full accordance with international norms.

We believe that United Nations agencies can play a more robust role in helping address the humanitarian crisis. We hope the United States can rally the international community to convince the Sri Lankan Government to allow full access by UN agencies to the conflict zone and relocation areas, which is not currently permitted. While the ICRC needs to continue playing a key role in assisting civilians leaving the conflict zone, UN agencies could assume leadership in helping to administer and to provide security in the camps. We urge you to actively encourage the United Nations to expand their role and the Sri Lankan Government to allow the UN to do so.

We wish to point out that the Genocide Prevention Project considers Sri Lanka one of eight countries on “Red Alert” – a ranking reserved for countries experiencing ongoing or imminent genocide. While some would dispute the legal definitions of genocide at this time, there can be no doubt that ethnic-based violence is widespread in Sri Lanka, and Tamil noncombatants are deliberately victimized by Sri Lankan Government policies.

Finally, we strongly encourage active leadership by the Obama Administration to bring about a long-delayed political settlement to the conflict that will guarantee Tamils full political rights and participation in their governance, and an end to the longstanding ethnic discrimination that has fueled the half-century-long violence. Until the ethnic conflict is substantively addressed, there will not be an enduring end to the conflict. As U.S. and international reconstruction aid is provided to Sri Lanka in the coming months, we urge the Administration to work with other donors to condition assistance on meaningful participation by Tamils in the government. This is important leverage the international community possesses, and we believe we should insist on progress toward a just political solution as part of our engagement with Sri Lanka.

We appreciate your attention to this urgent crisis.

Sincerely,

cc: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton