

Appeal to President Obama to Speak Out on the Sri Lanka Crisis

The Government of Sri Lanka is close to a military defeat of the 25 year-old Tamil Tiger insurgency, but tens of thousands of civilians are caught in the crossfire. The LTTE has repeatedly used the civilians as a human shield, shooting those who try to escape. Over-crowded civilian areas, as well as hospitals, have been shelled repeatedly by the Army. Conditions are grim: food, water and medicine is scarce, and sanitation facilities non-existent. ICRC ships have brought in some supplies, and have evacuated a number of the seriously sick and wounded, but many more remain. The UN reports that 6,432 civilians have been killed in the fighting since 20 January and another 13,946 wounded.

The LTTE has forcibly prevented civilians from leaving. Recently, thousands, trying to flee, turned back to avoid LTTE bullets, only to find themselves fired on by the Army. While an estimated 35,000 civilians have escaped in recent days, our sources speak of unimaginable suffering, with people risking death to tend the dead or wounded.

Information has been tightly controlled. The government has prevented independent observers from accessing the north, and human rights workers and journalists have been threatened into silence. The thousands coming out of the conflict zone, injured, weakened and traumatized, need immediate care. With only the Army present, reliable sources report that many are ‘disappearing’ in the screening process. People are then bussed 60 miles away to hospitals and camps. Many have died en route. The tens of thousands fleeing the fighting have been placed in camps surrounded by barbed wire, with no freedom of movement and where they are heavily guarded by the military.

It is of vital importance that independent monitors are able to be present during the screening process. Those subjected to screening and then detained in the camps must have access to a lawyer, the ICRC, and regular visits by humanitarian workers and by family members or immediate relatives. Civilians in the camps should not be held indefinitely. Those who are arrested on suspicion of being LTTE cadre should be registered with the closest Police Station, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, the ICRC, and UN agencies. It is vitally important to establish regional offices and branches of the Human Rights Commission in places where people are being detained.

It is imperative that President Obama step in to try to prevent further civilian deaths and injuries in this conflict. We ask that he:

1) Make an urgent call to President Rajapaksa to demand an immediate and significant pause in the fighting, in order to establish meaningful and effective humanitarian corridors so the civilian population can escape the battle zone.

2) Press President Rajapaksa to allow UN, ICRC and humanitarian agencies to have immediate access to all screening areas, as well as the camps where civilians from the “no fire zone” have been placed.

In addition, we ask that President Obama call on the LTTE to agree to join the GOSL in a pause in the fighting and to allow the civilians to leave.

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