

Sri Lanka: Urgent Action Needed to Prevent Civilian Deaths

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Tamil Tigers Block Civilian Movement; Government Limits Aid Access

(New York) - The Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) should take immediate steps to allow thousands of civilians trapped in a shrinking conflict zone safe passage and to ensure that they receive desperately needed humanitarian aid, Human Rights Watch said today. Intense fighting between the Sri Lankan army and the separatist LTTE has caught an estimated 250,000 civilians in deadly crossfire, and in the past week civilian casualties have risen dramatically.

"The situation for hundreds of thousands of vulnerable civilians trapped in the Vanni war zone is becoming increasingly dangerous," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. *"Both the government and the LTTE need to take urgent action to prevent large-scale civilian deaths."*

The LTTE has long prevented civilians under its control from fleeing to government-held areas. As the LTTE has retreated into its stronghold in the northern Vanni area since the start of a Sri Lankan army offensive in October 2008, the rebel group has forced civilians deeper into territory they control. An estimated 300 local staff members of the United Nations and international humanitarian organizations are trapped in the Vanni because the LTTE refuses to allow them to leave for safe areas. Altogether, an estimated 250,000 civilians are now trapped in the small part of Mullaittivu district that remains under LTTE control.

The Sri Lankan government has contributed to the risk to civilians by detaining those who have managed to flee LTTE areas, including whole families, in militarized detention camps, denying them freedom of movement.

"Civilians are scrambling for shelter in an area that is under heavy artillery fire, including many children, wounded, and elderly who need urgent assistance," said Adams. *"The UN and concerned governments should press Sri Lanka to take all necessary steps to spare civilians from harm."*

Over the last week, reports of high civilian casualties from the fighting have been reported by the few doctors in Mullaittivu district. The Sri Lankan army says it created a "safety zone" for civilians inside the war zone, but there are credible reports that shelling has occurred inside this zone.

According to the United Nations, a compound sheltering UN national staff inside the safety zone was shelled on January 24 and 25, killing at least nine civilians and wounding more than 20. On January 26, another artillery attack narrowly missed UN local staff working in the safety zone, but reportedly caused dozens of civilian deaths. In a January 27 statement, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) expressed concern that "[h]undreds of patients need emergency treatment and evacuation to Vavuniya Hospital in the government-controlled area." Because of government restrictions on the movement of journalists and human rights monitors, Human Rights Watch could not independently verify this information.

Military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara told the media that “There were no civilians killed,” and added: *“We are targeting the LTTE. We are not targeting any civilians, so there can’t be any civilians killed.”* Human Rights Watch said that the Sri Lankan military’s blanket rejection of any civilian deaths in the latest fighting raised serious concerns about its genuine willingness to minimize future civilian casualties.

The government-ordered September 2008 withdrawal of all UN and nongovernmental humanitarian organizations (with the exception of the ICRC and Caritas) from the Vanni plunged the region into a serious humanitarian crisis, with acute shortages of food, shelter, medicine, and other humanitarian supplies. The humanitarian crisis was documented by Human Rights Watch in its December 2008 report, *“Besieged, Displaced, and Detained.”* A companion report, *“Trapped and Mistreated,”* focused on LTTE abuses against the civilian population in the Vanni.

“The government’s near-total news blackout from the war zone prevents Sri Lankans and the rest of the world from knowing the full extent of the humanitarian crisis in the Vanni,” said Adams. *“The government can’t just blame everything on the LTTE and wash its hands of responsibility for protecting civilians.”*

The conflict in Sri Lanka is governed by international humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch has long urged both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to abide by the laws of war, including taking all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians during military operations and ensuring that civilians have access to humanitarian assistance.

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From Human Rights Watch.