

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka
by Mr. John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and
Emergency Relief Coordinator
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Thank you, Mr. President, for this opportunity to brief members of the Council about the current humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka.

Mr. President, as you are aware I recently returned from a two-day mission to Sri Lanka. The Secretary-General asked me to go to Colombo to press again for a peaceful, humane and orderly end to this terrible conflict, and to review the humanitarian response. As Mr. Nambiar highlighted to you a week ago, the situation in the north has seen dramatic developments since 20 April, when the Sri Lankan military broke through LTTE defenses in what is now, at best, called the conflict area. Over 100,000 people were able to flee, joining the 70,000 who had already escaped from the fighting during the first months of 2009.

During my short mission, I saw clearly that Sri Lanka is facing a double crisis. The first and most deadly is for the tens of thousands of civilians still trapped in the small stretch of land where the LTTE are holding out. We estimate that 50,000 or more people are squeezed into an area of less than 10 square kilometers. Though we have ample evidence to believe that these people want to leave, the LTTE continues to prevent this, and to recruit forcibly more and younger people to fight. I can only reiterate my strong condemnation of the LTTE for its continued disregard for the lives of the civilian population. For its part, the Government has given repeated assurances of restraint, and that it is not using heavy weapons. The evidence is that these assurances have not been respected.

While it remains difficult to put forward exact figures with confidence, we believe thousands of civilians have been killed in the fighting since the beginning of the year, and many thousands have been wounded. Around 6,000 wounded have been evacuated from the conflict area by the ICRC since the beginning of the year, while many more have been treated in the zone itself, despite the totally inadequate medical facilities.

Mr. President, the daily reality for the people trapped inside the conflict zone is beyond what any human being should have to bear. While the overwhelming issue is the risk of death and injury from the fighting, there is also much suffering caused by the shortages of medical supplies, food and water. That is why we have repeatedly called for a halt to the fighting, at least for long enough to get adequate amounts of medicine and food into the conflict zone. During April, just 1,119 metric tons of food reached the conflict zone, 1059 tonnes at the beginning of April and 60 tonnes over the last three days. As adequate security assurances could not be given by the parties, a shipment of 1,050 metric tons scheduled to reach the zone a few days ago was diverted to Jaffna. The minimal supplies now reaching the conflict zone can only address a fraction of the needs

for the remaining population. To illustrate, the 30 metric tons that reached the conflict zone on 28 April are only adequate to meet the needs of 60,000 people for one day.

Health conditions are also dire. The medical supplies allowed to enter the conflict area have been infrequent and have not included the necessary quantities of antibiotics, anesthetic and other items needed to treat the large numbers of war-wounded.

Given these desperate conditions, during my visit I again urged the Government of Sri Lanka to allow a UN humanitarian team access to the conflict zone in order to assess the humanitarian situation, as well as to help larger quantities of much needed food and medical supplies reach the area. The UN team in Sri Lanka had already begun preparations to undertake such a mission, following apparent agreement between Mr. Nambiar and the President of Sri Lanka the previous week. I was very disappointed that, in the end, the Government decided not to allow this mission to go forward, on the grounds that it could not visit safely and was not necessary. I strongly urge the Government of Sri Lanka to reconsider this position, and to agree to the kind of humanitarian pause which would allow the mission to go, in order to give much-needed respite to the civilians still trapped, and give a chance for extra aid supplies to get in too.

Mr. President, the second part of the crisis in Sri Lanka is the plight of the 170,000 people who have fled the conflict zone and are now in Government camps, mostly in the Vavuniya District. I visited one of the main sites, Menik Farm, outside Vavuniya town. I saw tens of thousands of people exhausted from their journey, traumatized by their ordeal inside the conflict zone, and now faced with poor conditions in overcrowded camps. I heard stories of difficult and dangerous escapes. It was clear that many are suffering severely, both mentally and physically.

The influx of over 100,000 people over a short period last week proved a massive challenge. Government and humanitarian agencies struggled to cope with providing minimum services of shelter, food and water in the first days. However, by the time of my visit, progress was being made on clearing land, putting up thousands of tents, organizing food distributions, and setting up water and sanitation facilities. I was encouraged that coordination between the humanitarian community and the authorities, with the temporary appointment of a senior general as Competent Authority, was improving and previous obstacles were being addressed. Nevertheless, it will take some days more before minimally acceptable levels of assistance can be provided. Vulnerable people – pregnant women, mothers with small children, disabled persons – must not be forced to wait for their rations in long lines. Water supplies must also be urgently augmented.

Additional resources are urgently required to address the basic needs of this exhausted and traumatized population. To accelerate the humanitarian response, we are currently preparing an 'emergency appeal' within the framework of the 2009 Common Humanitarian Action Plan which asked for US\$155 million and is currently 31 per cent funded. In my capacity as the Emergency Relief Coordinator, I have already announced an additional allocation of \$10 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund for

urgent shelter, water, sanitation, food nutrition, education and protection needs. I urge donors to provide extra funding urgently for this critical emergency phase.

Mr. President, as you know, we have also repeatedly called for the United Nations to be allowed full access to the screening processes for IDPs in transit to the camps, in and around Kilinochchi, as well as at the Omanthai crossing point, where the UN already had limited access. I understand that this may now have been agreed during the visit of the British and French foreign ministers yesterday. This is very welcome. I also expressed my concern about a proposed new Memorandum of Understanding for NGOs providing humanitarian assistance, which is posing problems for the NGOs themselves and for some important donors. I hope these issues can be postponed until after the current emergency is over. I also raised concerns about obstacles at the checkpoint south of Vavuniya, which have seriously impeded transport of goods and passage of staff to support the response. Here too I am encouraged by recent progress.

One issue of major concern and frustration has been our urgent requests to the Government to release the 13 UN national staff and 85 dependents from the IDP camps in Vavuniya. I am therefore heartened that the Government earlier today released 14 staff and dependents. I expect the release of those remaining soon also.

Meanwhile the issues of desperately needed family reunification in the IDP camps, removal of the military presence from the camps, freedom of movement for the IDPs, and plans for their early return to their places of origin as de-mining is completed, must all be addressed rapidly and satisfactorily. The current overcrowding would, of course, be eased if those who pose no threat were released to host families now.

Mr. President, the UN, from the Secretary-General down, will continue to engage with the Government in an effort to help the hundreds of thousands of civilians affected by this conflict. It is welcome news that over 100,000 were rescued from the zone last week. But the human cost of this in civilian casualties was extremely high. I do not want to see a repeat of this or worse, for the tens of thousands that remain. That is why we continue to urge a halt to the fighting and a continuing search for other ways to bring the conflict to an end. Meanwhile, I hope that the renewed pledge earlier this week not to use heavy weapons will be fully observed this time. Above all, the LTTE must now allow all civilians to leave the conflict zone. Their continued disregard for the lives and well-being of the population the LTTE claims to represent is beyond comprehension.

Mr. President, you may have heard in my briefing frustration that the horror of the situation in the Vanni is not provoking the necessary actions from either of the parties to prevent more bloodshed. There continues to be insufficient attention to the lives of the innocent as the military scenario plays out. So as the Government considers its last assault on the beaches, and as the LTTE prepares for this assault, I urge both parties to exhaust every possibility for ending this conflict peacefully, or at least to let the civilians go immediately. For our part, we will continue to do all we can to bring this about.

In conclusion, I repeat my pleas to the international community, particularly the members of this Council, to speak with one voice and look for ways to end the fighting in an orderly and humane fashion, without the further loss of civilian lives. I also hope an unambiguous message can be given by this Council that both parties must adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law, and that further violations of international law will not go unnoticed.

Thank you very much for your attention.