

**Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka
Statement 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 the Council on my recent visit to Sri Lanka.

As you know, the humanitarian situation in northern Sri Lanka has deteriorated significantly over the last few months, in particular since the beginning of this year. As Sri Lankan Government forces have advanced deep into the Vanni area, which had been under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, almost all the civilian population has been progressively displaced along with the LTTE. They are now in a rapidly shrinking pocket of land, and are increasingly being squeezed into a narrow coastal strip of 14 square kilometers, declared a 'no-fire zone' by the Sri Lanka Government, as shown in the map that I have distributed. Many of these people have been displaced many times in recent months, and indeed over the years, but they now face very great danger from fighting between the Sri Lankan Government forces and the LTTE. And there is strong evidence that the LTTE are preventing them from leaving.

Estimates vary of the number of civilians trapped, from 70,000 according to the Government, through around 200,000 according to UN estimates, up to 300,000 or more according to Tamil groups. The number of casualties from the fighting, among whom we believe are many civilians, cannot be verified in the absence of independent sources, since humanitarian agencies and the media have no access to the area, but we believe dozens of people per day at least are being killed and many more wounded.

The physical condition of these civilians is also of increasing concern. Because of the fighting in late January, land convoys organized by the WFP were suspended, leaving only the Government Agents and the ICRC providing some relief supplies by sea. Food, medical supplies, clean water, sanitation facilities and shelter are now extremely short. The risks from hunger and diseases are growing rapidly, in addition to those from the fighting.

Mr. President, the purpose of my visit was to obtain first-hand information about the dire humanitarian situation of those trapped, to look at arrangements for taking care of those who manage to escape, and to promote compliance by all the parties with international humanitarian law and international principles and standards for treatment of the displaced. I had discussions with the highest levels of the Government, including the President. I also met opposition politicians, including the leader of one of the important Tamil political parties; the Co-Chairs, namely the US, Norway, Japan and EU, as well as a wider selection of donors; and UN Agencies, NGOs, the ICRC, and representatives of civil society.

An important part of the visit was to Vavuniya, just south of the formerly LTTE held area, where some 36,000 IDPs who escaped from the fighting have been accommodated in the last three weeks. I visited transit sites in a school and other local buildings, where temporary

shelters and other facilities have been set up by the Government and local authorities, with the help of UN agencies, the ICRC and NGOs. I also visited a local hospital where some of the injured evacuated by sea from the Vanni pocket are being treated, and a large site to which the IDPs are gradually being moved - Menik farm - which has caused much controversy because of accusations that it is intended to house Tamil IDPs on a long term basis against their will. In both the transit site and Menik farm, basic needs such as food, shelter, clean water, sanitation and health care appeared to be being met, despite serious overcrowding in some of the transit sites. UN agencies and NGOs now have more or less free access to these sites, which is very important. But movement into and out of them is otherwise currently highly and unacceptably restricted.

Mr. President, I highlighted a number of key humanitarian issues with all I met. First and foremost, I expressed my extreme concern about the fate of the tens of thousands of civilians trapped in the Vanni pocket. I called on both sides to respect international humanitarian law, to ensure the protection of the civilians there, and to do everything possible to avoid further civilian casualties. This includes guaranteeing the safety and the security of a number of UN national staff and their dependents, and of NGO staff and their dependents, still trapped with the rest of the civilian population. I called in particular on the LTTE to let the civilian population leave freely, amid credible reports of shootings of some trying to flee, and to stop forced recruitment, especially of children. I also urged the Government to do all they could to make it possible for the civilian population to get out safely, including by means of agreement to a temporary halt to hostilities or a humanitarian corridor to allow people to leave, if this could be arranged and agreed, and in general to ensure a peaceful, orderly and humane end to the fighting. The risk of a very bloody end to this long running conflict is otherwise unacceptably high.

The Government assured me at every level that they have virtually stopped using heavy weapons because of their recognition of the need to spare the civilian population, who are of course their own citizens. It remains unclear how far this is the case in reality.

Secondly, I called upon both the Government and the LTTE to allow unhindered humanitarian access, to ensure that sufficient relief supplies are delivered into the Vanni pocket. Latest efforts by the Government in cooperation with the ICRC and WFP to ship food and medical supplies via the sea route are welcome. For example, on 26 February, 40 metric tonnes of food provided by WFP were delivered by a tugboat chartered by the Government. UN staff and dependents in the no-fire zone played a key role in its offloading and distribution. The next similar shipment by WFP is planned for this weekend. This is in addition to previous use of an ICRC-chartered passenger ferry, with a capacity of 10 metric tonnes, whose main task is to evacuate the wounded and other particularly vulnerable individuals. Since these evacuations started two weeks ago, nearly 2,000 people have managed to get out by this route. I repeat that recent supply deliveries are welcome, but to have any chance of meeting the most basic requirements of those trapped, such operations need to be scaled up much further.

Thirdly, I emphasized to the Government at every level that the treatment of IDPs has to be in line with international standards and principles. I urged the Government to step-up capacity and arrangements for receiving IDPs in Vavuniya dramatically, especially by allocating additional land for temporary sites, in view of what I very much hope will be an imminent major

influx of those currently trapped. I understand that, since my visit, an extra 250 acres have been cleared for temporary sites to accommodate 25,000 people. We expect another 400 acres to be allocated very soon. In addition, I urged the Government to move swiftly to eliminate progressively the military presence inside IDP sites, and to ensure increasing freedom of movement for the IDPs. I also raised specific concerns with the Government about the transparency of the initial security screening processes and about cases of family separation, and stressed the need for enhanced monitoring by the ICRC and UNHCR. I was assured by the Government that UNHCR can be present during the screening as the displaced leave the Vanni area, and that the Government will soon complete the registration of existing IDPs and distribute temporary ID cards, which will help to allow increasing freedom of movement. I understand that IDPs over 60 years of age have already been allowed to move out of the IDP sites to stay with relatives outside the camps where possible.

Fourthly, I reiterated the importance of the displaced being able to return to their places of origin as soon as possible. The Government, at every level, assured me that this was their firm intention, including the goal of returning 80 percent of the IDPs by the end of 2009, once the necessary de-mining is completed. I underscored the need to put to rest suspicions of wanting to manipulate the ethnic mix in the north or keeping IDPs in long-term camps against their will.

Finally, while not part of my humanitarian mandate, I urged the Government to take the historic opportunity to move swiftly, after the end of the fighting, to tackle underlying political issues, and move to a generally acceptable devolution settlement on a fully democratic basis.

Mr. President, I understand that there are continuing attempts via intermediaries to persuade the LTTE to let the civilians go and agree on a peaceful end to the fighting. I desperately hope these attempts will succeed very soon. I also urge the Government of Sri Lanka to hold back from any final military battle in order to allow time for the civilian population to get out safely, one way or another.

Mr. President, the Common Humanitarian Action Plan, or CHAP, 2009 for Sri Lanka was launched on 18 February, for a total amount of USD155 million. In order to accelerate humanitarian response by UN agencies in partnership with NGOs, I have released USD 10 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund. The funds will be utilized for life-saving activities in the areas of protection, food, nutrition, health, shelter, water and sanitation, and emergency education. I appeal to the donor community to respond generously to the CHAP, in the light of the existing and future needs in this very worrying situation.

Mr. President, my visit to Sri Lanka was intended as a visible demonstration of the international community's high level of concern about the humanitarian consequences of the continuing fighting. I trust that my pleas to all parties to do all they can to protect civilians and respect international humanitarian law will not fall on deaf ears. The continuing close attention of the international community will be a very important part of this, including scrutiny of the implementation of the assurances given by the Government. I urge again all those with any influence on the positions of the LTTE to use that influence now to persuade them to let the civilian population go. There is no time to lose.

Thank you for your attention.