



United Nations
Office of the Resident / Humanitarian Coordinator
Colombo, Sri Lanka

UN SRI LANKA STATEMENT

COLOMBO, 16 February 2009: The United Nations' concern for the welfare of the civilian population caught up in the fighting has heightened based on reports received in the last few days. While the designation of the new safe zone has provided some respite for the tens of thousands of civilians trapped for weeks by heavy fighting which has killed and injured many people, reports from yesterday indicate that there was some fighting inside the zone. This fighting led to the deaths and injury to yet more civilians. The United Nations calls for the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE to refrain from fighting in areas of civilian concentration.

The LTTE continues to actively prevent people leaving, and reports indicate that a growing number of people trying to leave have been shot and sometimes killed. There are indications that children as young as 14 are being recruited into the ranks of the LTTE.

Fifteen United Nations staff and 75 of their dependents, 40 of whom are children, and 35 of whom are women, remain in the same area, having also been prevented from leaving by the LTTE. Fifteen of these children have contracted respiratory diseases, a serious indicator for a population which is now in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

We are acutely aware that the suffering of our own UN staff and dependents is just one part of a much larger picture. However their release would be a good gesture and would strengthen the capacity of the UN to assist the tens of thousands of people both inside the Vanni pocket, and the approximately 30,000 IDPs who have left for government held areas.

Despite their own vulnerable position, many of these staff played an important role in helping with the distribution of 8,400 tons of food to the civilians of the Vanni over the past four months. We are especially concerned that one staff member was reported forcibly recruited into the LTTE yesterday. The UN calls on the LTTE to immediately release him, to desist from further recruitment of civilians, and to permit passage for people who wish to leave, especially the women and children.

Tens of thousands of civilians remain in the "Vanni Pocket," including a large number of children. They are experiencing serious shortages of food, medicine, and clean water, and as a result increasing numbers are becoming ill. Efforts to bring in more food and medicines have not yet been successful, and it is imperative that these needs be met.

The UN calls on both sides to find an orderly and humane solution so that civilians – and children in particular - can be spared further bloodshed and loss of life due to both disease and the fighting.

End.