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Sri Lanka: Renewed Conflict Displacing Thousands

In Sri Lanka increasing violence between the Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and government soldiers and allied militias has displaced 40,000 people in the north and east and driven another 2,800 to seek safety in India.

The violence is a bitter blow to the 300,000 Sri Lankans, primarily Tamils, who have remained displaced even after the 2002 ceasefire that brought an end of the 19-year civil war. Additional hundreds of thousands are largely cut off from development assistance in LTTE-controlled areas or live precariously in contested zones in the north and east. The promise of the ceasefire and the tenuous peace that resulted appears on the verge of shattering.

The December 2004 tsunami was indiscriminate in its impact, devastating Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese villages from the northeast to the southern coast. Unlike in Aceh, Indonesia, however, the shared suffering did not encourage further political reconciliation that might have built on the ceasefire. A period of bickering between the LTTE and the government over the allocation of relief funds, and the failure of the government to abide by commitments to share resources equitably, were followed by the November 2005 election of President Mahinda Rajapahse, who ran on a platform rejecting the agreements on tsunami aid-sharing and committing to reviewing the premises of the Norwegian-facilitated peace process. For its part, the LTTE prevented Tamil citizens under its control from voting in the Presidential election, in effect ensuring that the opposition candidate, who had negotiated the original ceasefire agreement and remained committed to its implementation, would lose the closely fought contest. With the LTTE having pulled out of any further negotiations in April, the escalating violence is leading to fears of a return to full-blown civil war.

In response to the rising violence, more than 2,800 people have fled from Sri Lanka to India since the beginning of 2006.

In desperation, some people are paying traffickers their life-time savings to get on board fishing vessels to India. The boats are packed with people and traveling at night, with no radar or modern equipment, to avoid navy patrols. Those on board face risks such as abandonment at sea and capsized vessels. In May, ten people died when the boat carrying them to India capsized.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recently released a statement urging those planning on making the journey to India to consider the serious dangers they may face. Most of the Sri Lankan asylum seekers head for the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu, an area that has hosted Tamil refugees since 1983 when large-scale violence broke out in their country between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. Although many refugees returned to Sri Lanka during the ceasefire, approximately 60,000 still live in about 100 government-run camps in Tamilnadu. At least another 20,000 refugees live outside the camps.

The Sri Lankan asylum seekers arriving in Tamilnadu are processed primarily at the Mandapam transit camp. They are interrogated by a special branch of the state police, especially about any connections with the LTTE, and after clearance they may either stay in the transit camp, or be moved to one of the refugee camps. New arrivals receive ration cards and small monthly stipends and can also take advantage of the health and educational facilities at the camps.

Refugees International commends the Government of India for keeping its borders open and for assisting and protecting

Sri Lankan asylum seekers. It is imperative that if more refugees come to India to escape the violence and insecurity in Sri Lanka that India not turn them away. The Government of India has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and takes direct responsibility for Sri Lankan refugees, allowing UNHCR only to become involved in facilitating and verifying the voluntariness of their return. RI urges the Government of India to allow UNHCR and international NGOs in addition to the Jesuit Refugee Service, which has been working in the camps, to become involved with provision of services and protection for the refugees. Sharing the responsibility of caring for the Sri Lankan refugees would improve the overall support to them.

The recent arrivals in India cite fear of being caught in the crossfire between the army and the LTTE as a major reason for fleeing. They also mention the rapidly deteriorating security situation and the lack of protection within Sri Lanka. Many of the refugees arriving in India are from Sri Lanka's eastern area of Trincomalee where there has been a sharp rise in violence in recent months. There have also been reports of increased child abduction in Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Clashes between LTTE and the military and naval forces in Mannar in the north-west have also led to reports of violence against civilians, with rape of women prevalent.

The intensified fighting between the military and the LTTE in recent weeks has led to the displacement of nearly 40,000 people in the north and east of the country. The newly displaced are in addition to the 300,000 who have remained displaced for years due to the conflict. Humanitarian agencies began to scale back assistance to people displaced by the conflict during the ceasefire and there has been little funding available for those currently displaced. The decision announced on July 4 by the European Commission to allocate seven million euros to humanitarian relief for conflict-displaced people is welcome and timely, but even greater commitments from the EC and other donors will be required.

Since the 2004 tsunami, humanitarian assistance funding has been devoted to tsunami relief and reconstruction, leaving many people displaced by the war without support. While millions of people sent money to assist in the reconstruction of Sri Lanka after the deadly 2004 tsunami, agencies and donors have struggled with how to extend that generosity to the Sri Lankans that fled man-made violence. As the political situation in Sri Lanka deteriorates, it is critical that international humanitarian agencies communicate with their donors about the need to loosen restrictions on funds to allow response to those who have been displaced due to conflict.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS THAT:

- ❑ The Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE make every effort to adhere to the ceasefire and resume peace talks immediately.
- ❑ The Government of India allow UNHCR to become involved with protection and assistance of Sri Lankan refugees.
- ❑ UNHCR increase its presence in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.
- ❑ International donors increase funding to UNHCR both in India and Sri Lanka in anticipation of further displacement.
- ❑ International agencies working on tsunami reconstruction in Sri Lanka seek permission from their donors to allocate funds to meet the emergency needs of internally displaced persons fleeing conflict.

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