

Sri Lankan government rejects UN ceasefire call

K. Ratnayake
28 April 2009

The Sri Lankan government has rejected a UN call for a “humanitarian ceasefire” in the island’s north, but, in a small concession to mounting international pressure, announced yesterday that the military would no longer use heavy weapons or aerial bombardment against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

A statement issued after a National Security Council meeting declared that “combat operations have reached their conclusion” and “security forces have been instructed to end use of heavy calibre guns, combat air craft and aerial weapons which could cause civilian casualties”. Operations would be confined “to rescuing civilians who are held hostage”.

The announcement has no credibility. President Mahinda Rajapakse previously dressed up the army’s offensive operations as “the world’s biggest hostage rescue,” blaming the heavy death toll on the LTTE’s use of civilians as “human shields”. Top defence officials repeatedly declared that the army was not using heavy weapons against the government’s declared no-fire zone.

The statement only confirms that the military has been using air attacks and heavy artillery on a tiny coastal strip of land—about 10 square kilometres—into which an estimated 50,000 civilians are crowded. The UN estimates that at least 6,432 civilians have been killed and 13,946 wounded in the past three months. In the past week, hundreds more have died as a result of the military’s indiscriminate attacks.

As for the claim that combat operations have ended, the defence ministry immediately denied that the government announcement amounted to a ceasefire, declaring such an interpretation to be a “blatant twist of the original statement”. In other words, the army will continue its criminal activities. In the guise of “rescuing civilians,” more men, women and children will be killed.

Moreover, the non-use of heavy weapons cannot be verified. No independent journalists are allowed near the war zone. The military has previously ordered all aid agencies out of the north. Any reports that do filter out from the no-fire zone and surrounding areas are denounced by the government as pro-LTTE propaganda.

UN humanitarian affairs chief John Holmes, who visited Sri Lanka over the weekend, made no comment on the government’s rejection of a ceasefire. In a press conference yesterday, he said that he expected the announcement barring the use of heavy weapons to be “genuinely respected”. At the same time, he noted that the government refused to allow a UN humanitarian team to go to the war front.

The government’s criminal indifference for civilian lives was expressed in its reaction to the LTTE’s announcement of a “unilateral ceasefire” on Saturday. Defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, branded the declaration a “joke”. He continued: “They were not fighting with us; they were running from us. There is no need of a ceasefire. They must surrender. That is it.”

While there have been reports from aid agencies that the LTTE has prevented civilians from fleeing, the responsibility for the humanitarian disaster in northern Sri Lanka rests squarely with the Rajapakse government. The army has laid siege to the area with 50,000 troops and prevented adequate aid supplies from entering the no-fire zone. Its aerial and artillery bombardment of civilian areas amounts to a war crime under international law.

The government’s contempt for Tamil civilians is underscored the fact that all of those who have been “liberated” from the LTTE have been flung into internment camps guarded by the security forces. According to government figures, 150,000 people are now being held at

38 sites around the towns of Vavuniya, Jaffna and Trincomalee. Aid agencies put the number as high as 200,000, with tens of thousands more on the way.

A UN agency press release issued yesterday stated: “Overcrowding at the camps is becoming a major worry. In one location, Menik Farm [near Vavuniya], eight to ten people are sharing shelters normally designed for four or five. Many IDPs, or internally displaced people, in the camps have no shelter from the sweltering heat.”

The UNHCR has requested public buildings and more land for the detainees in Mannar and Trincomalee, Jaffna and Vavuniya. In Trincomalee, a hundred acres of land is being cleared to accommodate 20,000 people (5,000 families). Aid workers have complained that many of the displaced have not eaten for days and malnourishment is rampant. Proper transport is not available to move the sick and injured and there is a serious shortage of medical staff.

Paul McMaster, a Médecins Sans Frontières surgeon, noted on April 27 that “all hospitals are struggling to cope with casualties”. At the Vavuniya hospital, the number of emergency operations dropped to 44 on April 23—the first time it was below 100 in five days. On April 24, the figure fell to 18, but only because the military was diverting emergency patients to other hospitals.

“There are still people crowded in the wards, in the corridors, on the floor, with fractures, open bullet wounds and blast injuries... There are many people who have been waiting on the wards to go into theatre, some of them for up to 24 hours,” McMaster stated. He visited the 350-bed Mannar hospital and found 1,000 patients—some in tents outside the hospital building.

McMaster continued: “We also drove to Menik Farm today, 40 km south west of Vavuniya. There are now 100,000 displaced people. Bulldozers are clearing more land to make more room and UNICEF is putting tents up by the hundreds... One man who had arrived at Menik Farm from the north a few days ago came up to us saying, ‘I have nothing, I have nothing.’ He was just standing there, shell-shocked, just telling us: ‘I have nothing’.”

There has been a flurry of statements by the UN and various major powers on the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka. The US has backed the call for a “humanitarian ceasefire”. British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and his French and Swedish counterparts are due in Colombo today for discussions on the war and the humanitarian situation.

Miliband yesterday welcomed the Sri Lankan government’s cynical announcement of a “halt to combat operations”. He added: “The scale of civilian casualties is very large indeed, extremely distressing to the international community and completely inimical to any kind of long-term settlement.”

The US State Department issued a statement on Sunday after a meeting of the so-called co-chairs—the US, the EU, Norway and Japan—responsible for overseeing the “peace process” initiated by the 2002 ceasefire. Far from demanding the Sri Lankan government pull its troops back to the previous ceasefire lines, the statement condemned the LTTE for preventing civilians from leaving the no-fire zone and called on it to “lay down arms to a neutral third party”. The statement urged the Sri Lankan government to offer an amnesty to most Tamil Tigers fighters and to open the way for a political dialogue.

None of these countries, however, have condemned the crimes of the Sri Lankan government, which was responsible for restarting the civil war in July 2006 and waging offensives with complete indifference to the impact on the civilian population. For nearly three years, the “international community” has tacitly supported Rajapakse’s communal war, turning a blind eye to the army’s atrocities and the government’s gross abuses of democratic rights. When the government formally abrogated the 2002 ceasefire in January 2008, the co-chairs made not the slightest protest.

The latest statements have nothing to do with concern for the plight of Tamil civilians in northern Sri Lanka. Rather the “international community” is concerned that communal tensions and political instability will continue without a political solution to the war that offers at least some limited concessions to the island’s Tamil elite. The US is particularly concerned that the war is having a destabilising impact in neighbouring India, which has become a significant economic and strategic partner. At the same time, all the major powers are positioning themselves to take advantage of any opportunities that open up in Sri Lanka once the army crushes the remaining LTTE resistance.



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