



# Tamil Information Centre

தமிழ் தகவல் நடுவம்

Committed to Human Rights and Community Development

THULASI

Bridge End Close (Off Clifton Road)  
Kingston Upon Thames KT2 6PZ, (UK)  
Telephone: + 44 (0) 20 8546 1560  
Fax: + 44 (0)20 8546 5701  
E-Mail: admin.tic@sangu.org

## PRESS RELEASE

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### Sri Lanka: War crimes warning as civilian deaths escalate

The Tamil Information Centre (TIC) strongly condemns the continuing attacks on the people of Vanni in Sri Lanka. The TIC has called on the governments in the region and elsewhere to make urgent strenuous efforts to prevent large scale killing of civilians. Both parties are responsible for the civilian casualties and must be urged to end their attacks immediately.

The relentless shelling and aerial bombardment of places where civilians have taken refuge, including the safety zones announced by the government itself, and the killings amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity. The UN estimates that some 250,000 civilians are trapped in the war zone. According to reports received by the TIC, up to the middle of February more than 1400 civilians, including many pregnant women, children and the elderly, were killed and over 7,000 were wounded in shelling and aerial bombardment. Reports say that parents and children are separated for screening and young women have been abused. The TIC has also received reports of rape and killing of young people.

The Sri Lankan government must immediately stop air raids and artillery attacks on areas where there are civilians. In four weeks of air raids the security forces have shown reckless disregard for civilian life. Nearly 50 civilians, including children are said to have been killed, and many more wounded in today's air attacks.

The TIC has documented Sri Lankan government's persistent use of indiscriminate force, which has killed hundreds of civilians, and has called on the international community to condemn the deadly violence in the Vanni directed against civilians in its attempt to capture Mullaitivu. The LTTE has vowed to retaliate and the fighting is likely to escalate and spread to other areas, affecting and endangering more civilians.

The exchange of accusations has continued as bodies pile up in ditches, bunkers and streets in Mullaitivu. Health centres and hospitals were attacked and medical personnel, sick and the wounded were killed. The Mullaitivu general hospital and the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital were targeted repeatedly by the Sri Lankan security forces.

People are suffering and dying due to lack of medicines and medical equipment. There are no health facilities in Mullaitivu to treat mass casualties. The medical supplies for the Vanni for the fourth quarter of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009 have not arrived. Blood for transfusion is unavailable in hospitals. Many are seriously injured and limb amputations are necessary to save their lives. Medical supplies are acutely low in hospitals and amputations are carried being out without anesthesia.

Pregnant women and children have been seriously affected by the continuous shelling and

bombardment. An increasing number of children have been killed or injured. On 17 February,

an UNICEF officer reported seeing babies with shrapnel wounds, gunshot injuries and blast wounds. The lack of food is also badly affecting pregnant women and children. The Vanni population needs more than 200 lorry-loads of food every month, but in January only 14 lorry-loads were supplied by the UN Food agency World Food Programme.

Currently the civilians arriving in Vavuniya from the Vanni are held in 13 camps surrounded by barbed wire denying them freedom of movement. These camps do not have adequate water, health and sanitary facilities. Relatives and even Members of Parliament have not been permitted to visit them. The military has also denied permission to officers from the regional offices of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRC) to visit patients arriving in Vavuniya and Trincomalee from the Vanni.

It is vital at this time of rapidly rising tension that all parties observe the requirements of international humanitarian law, and that other governments take all appropriate steps to insist that they do so. It has been repeatedly brought to the attention of the conflicting parties that under the laws of war, parties to an armed conflict must not make the civilian population the object of attack, or fire indiscriminately into civilian areas. Nor can they launch attacks that they know will cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects that exceeds the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. Such attacks constitute war crimes.

The TIC continues to assert that the ongoing war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE cannot be a solution to the Tamil national conflict. Only a negotiated settlement will bring lasting peace in the island nation.

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