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Media Advisory

Leading human rights' advocates urge the Security Council to uphold the responsibility to protect 100,000 civilians at risk of mass atrocities in northern Sri Lanka

In an open letter, leading human rights advocates called on the Security Council to take immediate action to prevent atrocities in Sri Lanka, in keeping with the pledge states made in 2005 when they adopted “the responsibility to protect.” One hundred thousand civilians are trapped by a rebel force fighting the Sri Lankan government, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who refuse to let non-combatants leave the combat zone, and use them as human shields. The Sri Lankan army has begun a final assault on the rebels which could lead to the deaths of thousands of civilians. John Holmes, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, has stated that “a bloodbath...seems an increasingly real possibility.” Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has stated that casualties may reach “catastrophic levels” if the fighting is not stopped.

“At the core of [the responsibility to protect] is the obligation to act preventively to protect peoples from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, rather than waiting until atrocities have already occurred, as states have too often done in the past,” said the letter’s signatories, members of the international advisory board of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect.

The letter calls on the Council to demand that the LTTE allow those civilians who wish to leave to do so, and to insist that the government of Sri Lanka agree to observe a more extensive ceasefire. In order to increase pressure on the parties, the Council must “bluntly characterize the violence in Sri Lanka as mass atrocity crimes,” demand that the government of Sri Lanka grant access to the conflict zone to humanitarian groups and to the media, dispatch a special envoy to the region, and/or consider the imposition of sanctions.

For information, please contact:

James Traub 212 627-4736/917 974-1680. traub54@gmail.com

Naomi Kikoler 212 817-1943 nkikoler@gc.cuny.edu