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Media Advisory

Security Council fails to act in face crimes against humanity risk in Sri Lanka. Council must take urgent action to protect thousands of people trapped in dire situation.

A group of leading human rights advocates condemned Security Council inaction as thousands of civilians in northern Sri Lanka are still facing the possibility of death and over 50,000 of them remain trapped held hostage by the Tamil Tigers of Tamil Eelam in a tiny strip of land on the coast. The UN estimates that 6500 civilians have died in the fighting since the beginning of the year; the figure may be significantly higher. The Security Council has issued no formal statement despite incessant shelling, starvation and disease remaining a daily reality for thousands of civilians and the Colombo government has been refusing to declare a pause in hostilities or permit more than the most limited humanitarian access, said members of the International Advisory Board of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect.

The group said that despite numerous pleas by leading diplomats and UN officials for the Security Council to call upon the government and LTTE to ceasefire, some Council members continue to block meaningful Council action. They have forced the Council to hold merely three “informal briefings in a basement room outside the Security Council’s chamber, with no formal outcome by the Council.

“The Security Council can no longer deny the facts on the ground. Tens of thousands of innocent civilians are trapped in a small pocket of land, held as hostages, shelled by government forces and living in abysmal conditions,” said Jan Egeland, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. “Why are these civilians less important than those in Darfur, DRC or Gaza?”

Despite repeated promises to cease using heavy artillery and aerial bombardment of the so-called “safe zone” where the 50,000 remain trapped, credible reports confirm that government forces have continued their use, killing and wounding civilians and forcing yet others to flee. As recently as Saturday May 2, an estimated 65 people were killed as a make-shift hospital was hit by heavy shelling, reportedly from government forces. As John Holmes, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, asserted: “The daily reality for people trapped inside the conflict zone is beyond what any human being should have to bear.”

Even outside the conflict zone, civilians are dying, whether from untreated wounds, disease or hunger—many while waiting to be processed at the screening centers established by the army to vet those who have fled the combat area. The Sri Lankan government has also refused to grant the UN and humanitarian NGOs access to the screening areas or, with very few exceptions, to the squalid and teeming camps for the 170,000 displaced persons.

“What more proof does the Council need before it acts to protect people at risk of crimes against humanity?” asked Gareth Evans, co-chair of the International Advisory Board of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and president of the International Crisis Group. “The international community vowed in 2005 that it would never again permit civilians to be killed by the thousands, as it so shamefully has in the past. This is the moment to make good that pledge.”

In recent days, the United Kingdom, the United States and France have increased their pressure on the Sri Lankan government and have expressed interest in placing the desperate plight of civilians in Sri Lanka on the Security Council’s agenda. China and Russia have blocked that effort, and have prevented the Council even from being formally briefed by UN officials. Libya and Vietnam have proved equally unwilling to consider Council action. Japan, despite its strong tradition of humanitarian engagement and its extensive ties to Sri Lanka, has been deeply reluctant to use the Council to prevent the looming calamity. And

Turkey, Burkina Faso and Uganda—a nation which has itself experienced atrocities--have yet to commit themselves to Council action.

Meanwhile, the situation has grown increasingly dire. The fighting has continued for weeks now while the UN, humanitarian NGOs and the media have been kept out of the conflict zone, with the exception of the ICRC who has limited access, and a few humanitarian personnel that remain among those effectively held hostage by the LTTE. In his briefing, John Holmes noted that the government had permitted only 30 tons of food—enough to feed 60,000 people for one day—to be delivered between April 1 and April 27 to the trapped civilians.

“All Council members serious about the prevention of crimes against humanity should lend their weight now in favour of immediate Council action,” said Monica Serrano, executive director and board member of the GC2R2P. “The Council must now raise its collective voice to send clear messages to the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government that they are each causing unacceptable suffering to innocent populations.”

The group called on the Council to pressure the Tigers release civilians, that both parties cease the hostilities, and that the Government of Sri Lanka permit the delivery of humanitarian supplies and open the screening centers and camps to UN agencies, the ICRC and other humanitarian bodies.

“Both the Tamil Tigers and government officials should recognize that there can be no impunity for those who commit crimes against humanity,” said Juan Mendez, formerly the Secretary-General’s special advisor for the prevention of genocide. “The Security Council must remind both sides of the consequences of violating international humanitarian law.”

Signed:

Jan Egeland, Director, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and member of the International Advisory Board, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

Gareth Evans, President of the International Crisis Group, former Australian Foreign Minister, and Co-Chair of the International Advisory Board, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

Juan Méndez, President, International Center for Transitional Justice, former Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, and member of the International Advisory Board, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

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Note to editors: *** World leaders came together to adopt the “responsibility to protect” at the 2005 UN World Summit and assigned to the Security Council the obligation to act when states manifestly fail to protect their own people. All Security Council members – including China and Russia - accepted that obligation.

The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect was established in February 2008 as a catalyst to promote and apply the norm of the “responsibility to protect” populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Through its programs, events and publications, the Centre is a resource and a forum for governments, international institutions and non-governmental organizations on prevention and early action to halt mass atrocities.