



*Sangam*

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ASSOCIATION OF TAMILS OF SRI LANKA IN THE USA

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## **Memorandum on the Protection of Tamil Civilians in NE Sri Lanka**

We, the Tamil American community are greatly concerned for the safety of the Tamil civilians in the North East of Sri Lanka. We are particularly concerned for the more than 250,000 Tamil internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are living in areas not controlled by the government and are now in the middle of a war zone with almost no humanitarian assistance.

We strongly support Secretary Clinton's call for both the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to agree to a temporary no-fire period in order for aid to reach the suffering population and for the ICRC to evacuate urgent medical cases. We also urge that humanitarian workers be given immediate full access to the conflict area in order to get food and medical assistance to the trapped civilians. Furthermore, we insist that safe zones be negotiated by both parties and that these safe zones involve UN monitoring mechanisms to provide assurance of compliance.

Though there is an acute food and medical shortage, in addition to continuous shelling and bombing inside the LTTE-controlled areas (resulting in scores killed every day), the majority of these 250,000 civilians are reluctant to cross over to the government-controlled areas.

On January 23, Stephanie Nolen a journalist from the *Globe and Mail* wrote:

*"The assumption is that all the civilians in the north would flee if they could...[and while] a few have managed to get out... awaiting a long and unpleasant "security screening"... they will live behind thick coils of razor wire, forbidden to leave. But no one here is talking about the other line in Vavuniya, the one five times as long — the line of people desperate to go back the other way. No one admits what it says about the chances for real peace in Sri Lanka that so many people see more hope for their families in a war zone than in the calm of the government-held side."*

Robert Evans, the chairman of the European Parliament Delegation for Relations with South Asia reiterated this on February 14<sup>th</sup> when he noted:

*"The Sri Lankan government has urged Tamil civilians to come over to their side for protection, but there is a strong reticence and fear of such a move. The Tamil people have seen so much death and destruction. They are terrified of Sri Lankan troops and their "holding camps", with all the stories of assaults and rape, not to mention the different language and religion which divides the Hindu Tamils from the Buddhist Sinhalese troops."*

Most of the civilians at risk have lived in LTTE-controlled areas for a generation. Although there have been allegations that it is the LTTE which is putting these civilians at risk, it is counter-intuitive that the LTTE would be harming some of the very people who have been closest to them. In parallel, these civilians are viewed as threats by the GoSL and it is in the GoSL's interests to eliminate as many as possible away from the eyes of the world.

The UN, India and the GoSL have called for the immediate evacuation of Tamil civilians from the conflict zone for their safety, yet Tamil civilians are reluctant to move into the GoSL's territory. Civilians fear entering government territory because:

- 1) There are credible reports in the media that numerous civilians are being killed or disappeared when they are 'screened' by the mono-ethnic armed forces on entering government territory.
- 2) Civilians are placed in internment camps after being screened, where they are guarded by the mono-ethnic armed forces and are at further risk of human rights abuses and neglect. The GoSL is asking for aid to keep these camps open for up to 3 years.

For the following reasons, **the evacuation of Tamil civilians** into government internment camps **would worsen their situation**:

1. Safely evacuating 250,000 civilians will be impossible when the GoSL and the LTTE are firing at each other. Hence the primary need for a "no-fire period."
2. Evacuation may well turn the 250,000 or more civilians into permanent IDPs who will be unable to return to their homes, but who will have to live in internment camps, euphemistically termed "Welfare Centres," like the 10,000 Tamil civilians who have been detained near the northern city of Vavuniya for many years without any freedom of movement.
3. Amnesty International says, "Given past experience, there are credible fears that those confined in transit centers could be vulnerable to enforced disappearances or extrajudicial executions, as well as increased targeting of persons, including arbitrary detention and harassment on an ethnic basis. There have been reports of several hundred cases of disappearance in Sri Lanka since 2006, many of them in government-controlled areas." Tamil civilians have been killed or disappeared at the rate of on average six a day for the past year and a half.
4. Though the GoSL says the UN and ICRC have access to these camps, in practice this has not happened.
5. Uprooting over 250,000 ethnic Tamil civilians from their areas of habitation and livelihood and placing them in internment camps with little hope of return is potentially a form of ethnic cleansing.

6. The vast majority of the civilians of Vanni area have fled from the GoSL armed forces into the 100 sq. km. LTTE-occupied area. If these civilians are placed in internment camps, much of the 'cleansed' Vanni will be turned into a High Security Zone, similar to many parts of the Jaffna Peninsula and the East, which are swept free of civilians and are patrolled by the mono-ethnic Sri Lankan armed forces. The fear is also that those areas not declared High Security Zones will be colonized by Sinhalese with GoSL assistance.

**For these reasons strengthening the safe zone is a much better alternative to evacuation.**

We ask the US Government to assure the protection of our relatives, friends and neighbors in the North East of Sri Lanka by helping to:

- Initiate a ceasefire
- Negotiate a secure civilian safe zone with international monitors
- Provide full immediate access for humanitarian goods, aid workers and the press
- End the blockade of goods and services to civilian areas
- Provide neutral international monitoring of the 'screening' process and internment camps
- Dismantle the internment camps in a short period and assure the return of civilians to their lands and homes.

Yours Sincerely,

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| Americans for Peace in Sri Lanka<br>Association of Sri Lankan Tamils in the USA<br>Australasian Federation of Tamil Associations<br>Boston Tamil Association of New England<br>Ilankai Tamil Sangam - Florida<br>Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America | HELP Advocates Sri Lanka<br>North Carolinians for Peace<br>People for Equality and Relief in Lanka<br>Tamils Against Genocide<br>Tamil Centre for Human Rights<br>Tamils for Obama<br>World Tamil Organization |
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