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## 'Clock ticking' for Sri Lanka's civilians, warns UN humanitarian chief



Civilians continue to flee fighting in the north of Sri Lanka

must be given the chance to do so," John Holmes writes in an **opinion piece** published today in The Guardian.

Mr. Holmes, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, urges immediate action to help those trapped in the Vanni region, warning that "a bloodbath on the beaches of northern **Sri Lanka** seems an increasingly real possibility."

The **Sri Lankan** military has pushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) into an area so small that any shooting or shelling inevitably causes casualties among the 150,000 to 190,000 civilians trapped in the same zone, he says.

There have been many hundreds of civilian deaths caused by firing from both sides, he adds, although exact numbers and who fired what and when are impossible to verify.

"It is clear that the LTTE is refusing to let people flee, though many are managing to escape somehow, and I fear the combatants may be gearing up for a final confrontation," Mr. Holmes states.

Civilians trapped by the fighting must be allowed a free choice of whether to leave or stay, he stresses. "If the LTTE truly has the best interests of the Tamil people at heart, they should contribute to ending this unnecessary suffering of the civilian population."

The **Sri Lankan** Government, for its part, must stick to its promise of not using heavy weapons while the fighting lasts, and hold off from any final attack in the conflict zone while the pause is negotiated, he adds.

"With so many people packed into such a small area, further military action not only risks more civilian deaths and injuries but also threatens to undermine the Government's credibility with the international community and the national groups with whom it must soon seek reconciliation."

Independent aid workers must be allowed to bring in more aid, assess the situation and help civilians to decide their own fate, he states, adding that unless better access for supplies and aid workers is urgently secured, "the ravages of disease, untreated wounds and hunger will kill many more people, regardless of the conflict.

"With thousands of lives in the balance and the clock ticking, the time for decisive action by the government, the LTTE and the international community is now, before it is too late," he stresses.

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"As a full-scale, long-term ceasefire is unlikely to be agreed now, the only way to get the civilians out of harm's way is a temporary humanitarian lull, during which aid workers and relief supplies must be allowed into the conflict zone, and those who want to leave

 

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