



SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT UPDATE REPORT



21 April 2009 No. 5

SRI LANKA

22 April 2009: The latest information indicates that the members of the Council are currently expected to be briefed today, 22 April 2009 at 5pm, on Sri Lanka by the Secretary-General's Chief of Staff, Vijay Nambiar, on his recent trip to Sri Lanka. Catherine Bragg, the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs is also expected to brief. The format will be an informal interactive dialogue involving Council members and Sri Lanka.

Expected Council Action

The Council is expected to be briefed on Sri Lanka by Catherine Bragg, the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs tomorrow, 22 April 2009. She is also expected to provide some details of the Secretary-General's Chief of Staff, Vijay Nambiar's recent visit to Sri Lanka.

The format will be that of an interactive dialogue similar to the second briefing on Sri Lanka which took place on 26 March in a room in the basement of the UN and involved all the Council members and the Sri Lankan permanent representative.

Key Recent Developments

Nambiar visited Sri Lanka for a two day official visit starting on 17 April. He met with President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Secretary of Defence Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and other officials. Among the key issues discussed was how the UN could assist civilians leaving the safe zone and help internally displaced persons (IDPs).

On 20 April the Sri Lankan government gave a "final warning" to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelem (LTTE) to surrender within 24 hours or face tough reactions from government forces. The deadline passed on the morning of 21 April without any LTTE surrender. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that since January some 64,000 civilians escaped from the last remaining territory still being held by the LTTE.

By April the LTTE were confined into a twenty square kilometre government designated no-fire zone. On 12 April the Sri Lankan government announced a two day "humanitarian pause" to allow humanitarian aid to reach an estimated 150,000 to 190,000 civilians caught in this zone. The Secretary-General welcomed this pause and called on the LTTE to "take concrete and immediate steps to protect civilians by respecting the pause for its full duration" and allowing civilians to leave the conflict zone. The Secretary-General on 15 April discussed civilian casualties with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes said that the two day humanitarian pause was inadequate to ease the suffering of civilians caught in the conflict as it did not allow enough time for significant amounts of aid to get in or for visits by humanitarian workers. He also warned that "a bloodbath on the beaches of northern Sri Lanka seems an increasingly real possibility". Reports also indicate that civilians were prevented from leaving by the LTTE during the two-day ceasefire.

Options

One option is for the members of the Council to agree that the president of the Council make a statement to the press with the following elements:

- expressing deep concern over the humanitarian situation and calling for a longer humanitarian pause;
- condemning the actions of the LTTE and calling on them to release trapped civilians and lay down their arms;
- urging the Sri Lankan government to do more to protect civilians; and
- stressing urgency of UN support to civilians in the safe zone.

Another option is issuing a formal Council press statement with the elements listed above. In order to do this the Council would first have to agree to hold formal consultations and obtain consensus on the statement.

An option for the Council is to request daily briefings from the Secretariat on Sri Lanka during this period of high-intensity conflict.

A further option is to ask the Secretary-General to appoint a high-level envoy for Sri Lanka to help coordinate UN efforts.

Possible future options are setting up a commission of inquiry to look into allegations of war crimes from both sides and agreeing to a UN role in mediating a political solution.

The Council may also choose to receive a briefing from Bragg and listen to the Sri Lankan ambassador but take no action.

Key Issues

The key issue is how the UN can best help to minimise civilian casualties and what role the Council can play in this regard.

An important issue in this context is reconciling the differences of views among different states regarding the right level of Council involvement and whether the Council should continue with informal briefings or should Sri Lanka be put on the formal agenda of the Council.

A connected issue is determining the factual situation in the no-fire zone given the lack of access by journalists and humanitarian workers. Some reports indicate that the government is still using heavy artillery and the LTTE is stopping civilians from fleeing, but verifying such information is difficult.

A related issue is whether the Tamil diaspora can put pressure on the LTTE to release the civilians trapped in the conflict zone.

Also an issue is how to ensure broader protection for the 64,000 IDPs who have left the conflict areas and are in camps or in hospitals.

Council Dynamics

All members of the Council were open to having a briefing. China and Vietnam were comfortable with a briefing as long as the Sri Lankan government was amenable. France and the UK were particularly keen to have the briefing as soon as possible.

The Asian members of the Council—China, Japan and Viet Nam—are reluctant to have any sort of statement after the briefing. China appears sensitive to the Sri Lankan government's position that as it is approaching the final assault it wants to avoid any Council action that could lead to the LTTE being able to regroup. Viet Nam is keen to have more information from the ground before making a decision on any further action by the Council.

The European members, particularly France and the UK, are keen to have an outcome from the briefing. The US is also supportive of some sort of agreed outcome and is supportive of a Council focus on the issue. Mexico has been an active player on this issue from the start. The non-Asian elected members have not been particularly vocal. Russia, too, appears to have taken a back seat on this issue for now.