



SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT

UPDATE REPORT



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SRI LANKA

Expected Council Action

On 27 February, the Council is expecting a briefing by John Holmes, Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, on the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka. This briefing follows his 19 – 21 February visit to Sri Lanka. It will take place in closed consultations under “Other Matters”, following a briefing on the Peacebuilding Support Office.

Given the difficulty of obtaining first hand news of the situation on the ground in Sri Lanka, members seem very interested in Holmes’ assessment of the humanitarian situation in the conflict zone.

Recent Developments

In the last month the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) appeared to be moving into a decisive phase.

The LTTE, led by Velupillai Prabhakaran, began fighting for a separate homeland in 1983. In recent months the Sri Lankan army has succeeded in confining the area controlled by the LTTE to about 34 square miles.

Humanitarian groups estimate that there are about 250,000 people trapped in the area and that the combination of its small area and intensity of the fighting was leading to disproportionate risks for civilians. (The government claims that there are only 70,000 civilians in the area.)

It seems that civilians trying to leave the war zone have been targeted and recruitment of child soldiers is on the increase.

It appears that Sri Lankan forces are currently moving on the last LTTE bastion, Puthukkudiyurppu near the northeastern coastal town of Mullaitivu.

Restrictions to journalists in the war zone have made it very difficult to ascertain the actual state of the fighting and numbers killed.

On 20 February the LTTE flew two aircraft to Colombo in an attempted aerial attack. The planes were shot down, with one crashing into the Internal Revenue Department and the second coming down north of Colombo. Forty-five people were killed including the two pilots.

The Sri Lankan government has rejected calls by the US, UK, Japan and the EU for a negotiated truce and are looking for an unconditional surrender from the LTTE. The LTTE has indicated a desire

for a ceasefire but are unlikely to agree to surrender their arms, a precondition of the Sri Lankan government for ceasefire negotiations. The Secretary-General has called on “all sides to pursue serious efforts toward political discussion” to end the conflict.

India has said that it is willing to facilitate the evacuation of civilians and provide humanitarian relief materials, medicine and medical care. (In 1987 India sent a peacekeeping force to Sri Lanka but withdrew three years later.)

On 6 February the Secretary-General spoke to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa about the worsening humanitarian situation in the conflict zone and conveyed his strong concern about the heavy casualties, including children. He has also reiterated the responsibility of the LTTE to let civilians move to safe areas and that the government was obliged to conduct its military operations with “due regard to the need to safeguard civilian lives”. On 24 February the Secretary-General called for a suspension of fighting to allow safe passage to civilians trying to flee the conflict.

During his recent visit to Sri Lanka, Holmes visited Vavuniya, a town just south of the conflict zone where many of the escaping civilians have sought shelter. Holmes called on both sides to make greater efforts to stop the rising toll of civilian casualties and to protect the people trapped in the area held by the rebel fighters. Holmes also announced that the UN has targeted \$10 million from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund to help civilians caught in the conflict.

Options

The most likely option is for Council members to discuss the issues relating to protection of civilians in the conflict zone with Holmes following his briefing. Specific action at this stage seems unlikely.

A possible option is for the Council to agree on a press statement or authorise the president to convey to the media the convergence of views in the Council including:

- expressing concern over the humanitarian situation, particularly the need to protect civilians and minimize the number of civilian casualties, including children;
- urging the parties to work towards a political discussion and an orderly end to the conflict;
- encouraging the Secretary-General to continue the organisation’s efforts to assist in these goals; and
- stressing that steps need to be taken to prevent further recruitment of child soldiers and the release and rehabilitation of those caught up in the conflict.

Key Issues

Among the key issues are:

- the potential scale of the humanitarian problem particularly with the food shortages imminent in the zone of conflict;
- the difficulty of obtaining accurate information on the conflict given that journalists have almost no access;
- whether the UN can play a more useful and active role in this conflict (for example, could it help with evacuation, given its expertise in this area, and reaffirm its willingness to be of assistance in possible peace talks);
- the increasing risks of a humanitarian catastrophe as the area held by the LTTE decreases and civilians remain trapped;
- the immediate needs for rebuilding infrastructure, homes and schools in the north; and
- the problem of internally displaced persons, both in meeting their current needs in the camps and in resettling them in the future.

Council and Wider Dynamics

In recent months Council members have been divided over whether this issue is one that should be brought before the Council. Members like Mexico and Japan were pushing for a Council discussion several weeks ago. They faced opposition from Russia which was of the opinion that the issue should not be on the Council's agenda. Most other members seemed willing to distinguish between having a formal agenda item and an informal discussion in the context of a briefing. It seems that agreement has been reached by a compromise under which members would hear a briefing but not agree to a formal agenda item which would open the way to substantive action.