

Government and UN Agencies agree to work closely to assess the civilians' needs

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama today held a meeting with Heads of UN Agencies based in Colombo with the view to discussing all issues of mutual interest regarding the protection of civilians in the conflict zone. The UN Resident Coordinator along with the Representatives of UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and the Chief Security Advisor of the UN Office in Colombo were present. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Chief of Defence Staff Air Vice Marshal Donald Perera, and Senior Officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated at the comprehensive discussion with the UN Agencies.

Issues arising out of the LTTE holding civilians from leaving the conflict zone and the discrepancies pertaining to reported casualty figures were discussed and it was agreed that the Government and UN Agencies would work within a spirit of cooperation to assess more accurately the needs of the civilians and the measures taken for their protection by the government.

The Defence Secretary maintained that the casualties caused by the LTTE are under-reported. The surge of civilians leaving the conflict zone, numbering in excess of 20,000, are encouraging even though the LTTE regrettably maintains a hostile approach on the exodus of civilians.

He added that some of the international agencies should be mindful of the responsibility cast on them in disseminating information to the world at large.

The UN officials appreciated arrangements made by the government of Sri Lanka to receive the IDPs and agreed to work closely with the government in this regard.

The Defence Secretary mentioned that the LTTE continues to use children as suicide cadres. The UNICEF representative expressed his desire to receive regular updates on this.

The Foreign Minister appreciated the UN's role in Sri Lanka especially, in addressing humanitarian issues and supplementing counter terrorism efforts of the government.

The difficulty in differentiating civilians from the LTTE cadres in the conflict zone is being carefully addressed whilst the casualty figures reported from areas where fighting is continuing are distorted.

It was also observed that inaccurate accounts of the situation should be avoided at all costs and the UN will continue to assist the government to ensure the welfare of civilians in the conflict zone in terms of their rescue, resettlement and rehabilitation.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Colombo

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