

President urges LTTE: Release civilians in 48 hours

My Government, since its election, has always been concerned about the welfare of all citizens of Sri Lanka and their economic and social progress. The welfare of the citizens of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, especially of those in areas dominated by the LTTE, has been of even greater concern to my Government. As a result, my Government has always been committed to usher peace in those regions so that all people of Sri Lanka, especially those in the North and the East will have the opportunity to exercise their democratic rights and choose their leaders freely through election to realise their political aspirations within the democratic framework that has flourished in Sri Lanka for long years.

However, all efforts for finding solutions peacefully for outstanding issues in the North and the East were repudiated by the LTTE and I was compelled to take measures to combat the terrorism unleashed by the LTTE on the people of Sri Lanka. In the efforts to eradicate terrorism and in the humanitarian operations to free civilians from suffering and insecurity, the Government and the Security Forces have been conscious of the welfare of civilians, their lives and property at all times. In addition, as a democratically elected Government with a clear mandate from the people, we have always been determined to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka and to find solutions to all problems within a democratic framework while uniting all the people of Sri Lanka.

In this context, the Security Forces have been successful in conducting their mandated operations to achieve these objectives of the Government and the people of Sri Lanka. The Government is now poised to take decisive steps that will enable an environment conducive for the reintroduction of democracy that will provide the people of the Northern Province an opportunity to exercise their right to elect their leaders by free choice so that solutions can be found for all outstanding issues through negotiation and discussion and not through violence.

As a result of the operations by Security Forces, LTTE control over civilians is now confined to a small area in the Northern Province and a large number of civilians are being held there forcibly by the LTTE, thus endangering innocent civilian lives.

Being acutely conscious of the welfare of the civilians forcibly being held in the conflict zone by the LTTE, we have declared a safe zone for civilians, the coordinates of which were announced by the Security Forces. This is to ensure that they stay out of harm's way during engagements between Security Forces and armed LTTE cadres, and to assure the safety and security of civilians. It is unfortunate that the LTTE is exploiting this declared safe zone for civilians by placing their heavy artillery within the safe zone and using it as a launching pad to attack Security Forces and indiscriminately kill civilians.

I urge the LTTE, within the next 48 hours to allow free movement of civilians to ensure their safety and security. For all those civilians, I assure a safe passage to a secure environment. I also assure all those living in the North and in conflict areas in particular, that vacating LTTE held areas will ensure their physical security and enable peace, freedom and rights for all citizens of this country.

Mahinda Rajapaksa
President of Sri Lanka

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