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## UN Under-Secretary General urges LTTE to free civilians

The UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Sir John Holmes has urged the LTTE to permit civilians who are being held hostage by the LTTE in the Mullaitivu district to be freed immediately, so that they could come into the cleared areas. He made this call at a joint media briefing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday (19 February 2009) following wide-ranging talks with Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama.

Earlier, Minister Bogollagama welcoming the senior UN official, stated that the visit of Sir John to Sri Lanka was timely and would provide him the opportunity of getting a first-hand assessment of the extensive facilities that the Government has made to provide food and essential services to the civilians held captive by the LTTE, and for the rehabilitation and resettlement of the large number of civilians who have escaped from the conflict zone, being accommodated at transit points and welfare villages. The Minister gave a comprehensive briefing to the visiting official on the humanitarian situation in the North, highlighting the paramount concern of the Government of Sri Lanka for the safety and wellbeing of the roughly 70,000 civilians who are being forcibly held against their will as human shields by the LTTE in a rapidly shrinking area under its control. He emphasized the strict adherence of the security forces to the Government's policy of zero tolerance on civilian casualties in prosecuting the final phase of the military operations to eradicate the menace of terrorism from Sri Lanka, despite paying a heavy price in terms of their own casualties.

The Foreign Minister commended the UN system in Sri Lanka for its abiding commitment to assist the Government of Sri Lanka in its efforts to ameliorate the living conditions of displaced civilians and looked forward to a greater engagement of the UN agencies and the international community at large in the post-conflict development agenda to be launched shortly. Welcoming the UN Sri Lanka Statement issued by the Office of the UN Resident/ Humanitarian Coordinator in Colombo on 16 February 2009, in which the UN has critically noted that the LTTE was actively preventing people leaving, and pointed to reports that a growing number of people trying to leave have been shot and even killed, Minister Bogollagama called for concerted international pressure to be exerted on the LTTE to free the helpless civilians. The Minister however noted that in the past the LTTE had consistently breached the confidence placed in its engagement with the international community. He also referred to the Suo Motu Statement on the situation in Sri Lanka by the Indian Minister of External Affairs, Shri Pranab Mukherjee in the Lok Sabha on the previous day (18 February 2009), and reiterated President Mahinda Rajapaksa's call to the LTTE to lay down its weapons and renounce violence permanently, which would immediately put an end to the armed conflict. However, it was a matter of regret that the LTTE has repeatedly rejected calls by Norway, the Co-Chairs and other influential members of the international community to surrender, which is unnecessarily prolonging the conflict and causing greater hardship and suffering to the innocent civilians.

Responding to the Minister's briefing, the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, Sir John Holmes thanked the President and the Foreign Minister for the invitation extended to him and facilitating his visit to Sri Lanka at short notice. He emphasized that the UN has no political agenda in its engagement with Sri Lanka and that the purpose of his visit was purely humanitarian and designed to help and support the Government of Sri Lanka in addressing the current humanitarian challenges that it confronts in dealing with issues concerning the civilians who are still trapped behind LTTE lines in Mullaitivu.

While welcoming the Government's decision to designate a new safe zone along the Mullaitivu coast-line, where the LTTE has forced civilians to move from the interior, Sir John expressed his apprehension that even this area could become unsafe if the LTTE used it for military purposes. Hence, he was of the view that there is a sense of urgency to evacuate the civilians from this place to the safety of Government controlled areas. However, for such an operation to be carried out, the cooperation of the LTTE would be vital. Hence, he called upon the LTTE to allow the civilians, freedom of movement in conformity with the principles of international humanitarian law.

The Commissioner General of Essential Services, Mr. S.B. Divaratne briefed the senior UN official on the arrangements made by the Government since the onset of the present phase of the conflict to ensure an uninterrupted supply of food, medicines and essential items to the civilians in LTTE held areas. He noted that since last month after the provision of supplies overland became difficult, the only feasible option was to keep the people supplied by sea. Accordingly, the Government had a few days earlier transported 40 tons of food items by a tug from Trincomalee to the Mullaitivu coast under the aegis of the ICRC to be dispatched among civilians. Using two vessels, Mr. Divaratne said that the Government would be able to send between 300 and 350 tons of supplies per week by sea to the displaced civilians.

The Secretary to the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition, Dr. Athula Kahandaliyanage informed Sir John Holmes of the directive of President Rajapaksa to his Ministry that all possible measures should be undertaken to ensure that the people of the North, especially the displaced civilians are provided medicinal drugs and medical facilities, even under the increasingly difficult circumstances. He thanked the World Food Programme (WFP) for the food supplements that are being provided, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF for infrastructure support in terms of provision of vehicles and funding.

The Foreign Minister was assisted at the discussions with the visiting UN official and his delegation by the Foreign

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Secretary Dr. Palitha Kohona, Secretary to the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition, Dr. Athula Kahandaliyanage, the Commissioner General of Essential Services, Mr. S.B. Divaratne, Additional Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, Air Vice Marshal (Retd) Ravi Arunthavanathan and senior officials of the Foreign Ministry.

Following the joint media briefing addressed by the Foreign Minister and Sir John, the discussions continued over a working luncheon, attended by the Minister of Science & Technology and the Chairman of the APRC, Prof. Tissa Vitarana, TULF Leader Mr. Anandasangaree, the Indian High Commissioner, Ambassadors representing the 4 Co-Chairs, namely the US, Norway, Japan and the EU, , the UN Resident Representative, Heads of UN agencies and the Head of the ICRC in Colombo.

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