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The already severe humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka is on the brink of catastrophe. It will take the quick arrival of humanitarian relief and high-level international political muscle to bring the nightmarish situation to an end and prevent a slaughter.

An estimated 150,000 civilians are now trapped in a tiny pocket of land between Sri Lankan military forces, whose artillery shells regularly fall among them, and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who shoot at them if they try to escape. Food, clean water and medical assistance are all increasingly scarce.

According to U.N. figures, 2,300 civilians have already died and at least 6,500 have been injured since January. Some 500 children have been killed and over 1,400 injured. What happens to the rest of those caught in the middle of the government's onslaught and the Tigers' fight to the death depends not only on the two parties but on the international response as well.

The crisis is born of acts by both sides that most probably amount to serious violations of humanitarian law and perhaps to war crimes or crimes against humanity.

As it has withdrawn before the government forces, the LTTE has sought refuge in the civilian population. It has been holding men, women and children as hostages, forcibly recruiting them and using them as human shields.

The government has responded with attacks that independent observers describe as indiscriminate. Distinguishing combatants from noncombatants has become impossible with fighters and civilians packed so closely together. Alarming reports are coming in that government forces are shelling even those areas they themselves have declared "no-fire zones."

If both groups do not end the fighting immediately, the lives of tens of thousands of civilians are at risk. ()

Full text of the op-ed:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940CE1D6173FF933A15750C0A96F9C8B63&scp=1&sq=Sri%20Lanka:%20%22A%20Slaughter%20Waiting%20to%20Happen%22&st=cse>