

Daily Press Briefing
13 May 2009

() As some of you know, we have a humanitarian crisis that's taking place in Sri Lanka, and I've been increasingly saddened by the desperate news in recent days. Tens of thousands of innocent civilians are trapped between the warring government forces and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka with no means of escape, little access to food, water, shelter and medicine. This has led to widespread suffering and the loss of hundreds if not thousands of lives.

Without urgent action, this humanitarian crisis could turn into a catastrophe. Now is the time, I believe, to put aside some of the political issues that are involved and to put the lives of the men and women and children who are innocently caught in the crossfire, to put them first.

So I urge the Tamil Tigers to lay down their arms and let civilians go. Their forced recruitment of civilians and their use of civilians as human shields is deplorable. These tactics will only serve to alienate all those who carry them out.

I'm also calling on the Sri Lankan government to take several steps to alleviate this humanitarian crisis. First, the government should stop the indiscriminate shelling that has taken hundreds of innocent lives, including several hospitals, and the government should live up to its commitment to not use heavy weapons in the conflict zone.

Second, the government should give United Nations humanitarian teams access to the civilians who are trapped between the warring parties so that they can receive the immediate assistance necessary to save lives. Third, the government should also allow the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross access to nearly 190,000 displaced people within Sri Lanka so that they can receive additional support that they need.

The United States stands ready to work with the international community to support the people of Sri Lanka in this time of suffering. I don't believe that we can delay. Now is the time for all of us to work together to avert further humanitarian suffering. Going forward, Sri Lanka must seek a peace that is secure and lasting, and grounded in respect for all of its citizens. More civilian casualties and inadequate care for those caught in resettlement camps will only make it more difficult to achieve the peace that the people of Sri Lanka deserve. ()

Source: <http://srilanka.usembassy.gov/pr-05-13-09.html>