

National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

12/14 Purana Vihara Road

Colombo 6

Tel: 2818344, 2854127, 2819064

Tel/Fax:2819064

E Mail: npc@sitnet.lk,

Internet: www.peace-srilanka.org

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Media Release

Civilian Welfare Must Not be Compromised by Military Exigencies

The ongoing fighting in the north is leading to the displacement of tens of thousands of people from their villages and homes. Much of the territory currently controlled by the LTTE has become a battleground with civilians fleeing from place to place. Reports from humanitarian agencies working in the north indicate that they cannot cope with the demand for emergency shelter, water and sanitation to meet the needs of the rapidly growing displaced population. Unfortunately, it appears that the humanitarian organizations are lacking in capacity to deal with this crisis, in part due to the restrictions that the government has placed upon them.

The government's stated concern has been that the LTTE will take a part or most of the supplies brought in by the humanitarian organizations for its own use, and to further strengthen its war machine. The government has been producing evidence to show that equipment and relief items sent in by humanitarian organizations have ended up in LTTE camps. However, the National Peace Council believes that the welfare of Sri Lankan citizens ought not to be subordinated to military necessities.

As a response to this humanitarian crisis, the Bishop of Mannar, Rayappu Joseph, has issued a comprehensive statement requesting the government to spell out its plan for the safety and security of its citizens in the north. He has called for the government to take urgent action to permit U.N. Agencies and NGOs to easily reach these affected people and help them obtain their basic needs. He has also proposed the establishment of No Conflict Zones in each of the three northern districts affected by the present fighting.

The National Peace Council supports these proposals of Bishop Joseph and calls on the government to make its response without delay. We hold that the welfare of the civilian population must not be compromised by military exigencies. They must be safeguarded from collateral damage and not be used as human shields in any circumstance. We call on the government not to use its air and artillery power to attack areas in which civilians are residing.

We also call for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor, with the cooperation of UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross, whereby people who wish to leave the areas of combat are permitted by both the government and LTTE to do so in accordance with the basic human right of freedom of movement. The people who leave the areas of combat should also be treated with respect and dignity, and permitted freedom of movement, without being confined to welfare camps as occurring at present at Kalimottai and at Sirukandal, as pointed out by Bishop Joseph in his statement. We urge that the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement be followed by the parties to the conflict.

Governing Council

The National Peace Council is an independent and non partisan organisation that works towards a negotiated political solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. It has a vision of a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all the communities are respected. The policy of the National Peace Council is determined by its Governing Council of 20 members who are drawn from diverse walks of life and belong to all the main ethnic and religious communities in the country.