

## **Armed forces to restrict operations to defensive mode during Sinhala & Tamil New Year**

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has ordered the armed forces to restrict their operations to those of a defensive nature during the Sinhala & Tamil New Year. The President, deeply conscious of the need to give the civilian population, trapped in the No Fire Zone(NFZ), the opportunity to celebrate these festivities in a suitable atmosphere, has taken this decision, which would also enable their uninhibited freedom of movement from the NFZ to the cleared areas.

The Government, in a Statement has noted that the Sinhala & Tamil New Year is symbolic of the amity prevailing among all communities in Sri Lanka. It further stated that in the true spirit of the season, it was timely for the LTTE to acknowledge its military defeat and lay down its weapons and surrender. It also called upon the LTTE to renounce terrorism and violence permanently.

Foreign Minister, Rohitha Bogollagama commenting on the Government decision today said that he believes that it is the overwhelming desire of all peace-loving Sri Lankans, both in the country and abroad to see that their brothers and sisters, who are undergoing untold hardship and suffering, will be freed soon from the brutal terror of the LTTE.

He also observed that Sri Lanka's valiant security forces are poised to embark upon this noble endeavour as the remaining part of the humanitarian mission launched by them to eliminate terrorism from the country and restore freedom and democracy to a section of the people, who have been long enslaved by the LTTE. The Minister emphasized that the Sri Lankan armed forces bear an exemplary record of according the highest respect for human rights and upholding International Humanitarian Law in the conduct of their operations to combat terrorism. He highlighted the utmost restraint and high degree of discipline of the armed forces, which have contributed in no small measure to the resounding success of the entire campaign to eliminate terrorism, with great effort to avoid civilian casualties. This is highly commendable when compared to other armed forces in the world, which, in their operations, have clearly failed to even come close to these standards.

Minister Bogollagama recalled that when the President declared a 48-hour temporary pause in military operations in late January this year, to enable civilians to move into the government declared No-Fire Zone, the LTTE cynically exploited this opportunity to shift its artillery mortar launchers and heavy weapons into this area, and began attacking the security forces. He said that Government troops have paid a heavy price in exercising maximum restraint by not retaliating, in order to avoid causing civilian casualties. Moreover, he stated that the Government is aware that the LTTE has fortified the entire No-Fire Zone with its remaining armaments and heavy weaponry, jeopardizing the lives of innocent civilians entrapped in that area.

With the President's directive to the armed forces to restrict their operations to those of a defensive nature during the Sinhala & Tamil New Year, the Government expects the LTTE to

allow the people to leave the No-Fire Zone. At the same time, it is incumbent on the international community and Sri Lankan Tamils abroad to prevail upon the LTTE to release the civilians who are being held hostage.

It is the fervent desire of the Government of President Rajapaksa that the New Year will herald an era of lasting peace and prosperity for all the people of Sri Lanka, free of terror that has long plagued the motherland.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Colombo

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