

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since the early hours of Monday, 20th April 2009, over 100,000 civilians held hostage by the LTTE, have braved the bullets and other forms of violent intimidation unleashed by the LTTE and come across to the cleared areas from the no-fire zone (NFZ). The end game that is being played out on the muddy waters of the western edge of the NFZ along the Mullaitivu coast portends the death knell for the LTTE. 102,790 ordinary people have voted with their feet, to free themselves from LTTE tyranny, and we are still counting. What is now unfolding before our very eyes is by far, the largest hostage rescue operation that has been undertaken by any military in the world. These people have clearly demonstrated their total rejection of the LTTE and are living proof of the endorsement of the underlying humanitarian objective of the mission of our armed forces, namely to rescue them to safety. This massive movement of human beings of epic proportions, is a fitting reply to certain skeptical members of the international community who, obviously misguided by Tiger propaganda, have been making persistent predictions of massive civilian casualties, in the event our security forces embarked on the rescue mission.

The Government of Sri Lanka shares the concern of the international community over the plight of the civilians who are being held captive by the LTTE in the NFZ. No one has more concern than the Government about the safety of the country's civilians. In fact, it was with this objective that President Mahinda Rajapaksa issued a directive to the armed forces to restrict their operations to a defensive mode during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year period. Everybody is aware that the recent pause in military action did not result in any significant movement of civilians from the NFZ.

Indeed, what actually transpired was that the LTTE used the period of our unilateral humanitarian pause to compel civilians to fortify the earth bunds and trenches, actively prevented people to move out of the no fire zone, negating the very purpose for which the Government had declared the pause. Notwithstanding the repeated calls by several countries and the UN to the LTTE, to permit the civilians, freedom of movement, the LTTE callously ignored them and went about strengthening its military positions and firing at our security forces from the NFZ. Thus, it has become patently clear that the LTTE had cynically exploited the humanitarian pause. Hence, it is quite ironical that these very same countries and institutions are still calling on the Government to extend the humanitarian pause!

Our armed forces have done Sri Lanka proud and shown themselves as an exemplary and highly disciplined military in undertaking this hostage rescue operation, with the only civilian casualties having been caused by LTTE cadres deliberately shooting and killing civilians in a bid to prevent them from fleeing, as well as the those who perished when three suicide bombers exploded themselves among the people, who had dared to defy LTTE orders and came over to the cleared areas. Of course, there is no denial that the LTTE itself has suffered massive casualties when the military engaged them in operations. However, to suggest that these casualties are civilians is preposterous. The lingering chorus of allegations being made by certain quarters, including the various fronts of the LTTE that the government forces are shelling the NFZ is quite simply incongruous, especially when such claims are juxtaposed with the reality of thousands of civilians fleeing across LTTE lines into the cleared areas. Such a scenario would be quite inconceivable if the security forces were in fact firing at them.

As military operations go, these can take various forms. The military rescue operation that was mounted by the Sri Lanka Army was not an assault type on fortified positions of the enemy, but a highly professional rescue mission, for which our soldiers had been especially trained. Thus, the dire warnings by some of our friends in the international community of a blood bath, if the Army entered the NFZ, did not come to pass. In fact, now the Army has entered the NFZ at Pudumattalam and effectively bisected it,

confining the LTTE to the southern part. The LTTE is still holding 15,000 to 20,000 civilians, hostage, as human shields, squeezed into an area less than 5 square miles in extent.

The government has put in place, facilities to receive around 120,000 displaced persons. The real need of the hour now is for the international community to rally round the Government and tangibly come to the assistance of the thousands of civilians who have fled the brutal control of the LTTE and sought sanctuary with the armed forces. With the unprecedented influx of large numbers of people in such a short period of time, obviously we do face an emergency humanitarian situation, and our friends in the international community are most welcome to provide emergency relief assistance, initially by way of semi-permanent shelter, water purification plants, sanitation facilities and medical assistance. The detailed list of requirements will be communicated to you in due course. The core aim of the Government remains to re-settle all those who have been displaced due to the conflict in their original places of habitation.

The Government's sincere desire is to see through this process as expeditiously as possible. However, practical constraints remain. Vast areas previously inhabited by these civilians have been heavily mined by the LTTE, before they fled the assault of the army. Moreover, the LTTE also systematically destroyed the standing buildings and infrastructure, before they were driven out of these areas by the army. In order to expedite the resettlement programme of the IDPs, we urgently require assistance in mine clearance, as well as in the rebuilding of the war shattered infrastructure in the areas of conflict in the North.

The question of access whether it be for humanitarian aid agencies or media keeps surfacing. INGOs are assisting the welfare villages and access is dependent primarily on the security situation on ground and also the government does not wish to encourage IDP tourism by allowing unstructured visits to the welfare villages. At present, 14 INGOs and UN Agencies are actively supporting the efforts of the Government to provide the basic needs and essential services for the IDPs accommodated at the IDP transit points and welfare villages. High ranking UN officials as well as diplomats based in Colombo who have visited these facilities have expressed satisfaction and commended the Government for its sincere commitment to provide the IDPs the best possible services, under extremely difficult conditions. There have been a number of visits for both the local and international media to these facilities, which have been done in a purposeful manner.

The Government is always receptive to constructive criticism and insofar as conditions in the IDP camps are concerned, we are well aware that the situation is far from ideal. However, the Government has consciously worked towards addressing the shortcomings that have been highlighted. The issue of lack of communication with the inhabitants of the IDP facilities has already been taken care of – telephone, telegram and postal services are now operating in almost all the sites. Also, around 1,800 IDPs with special needs, particularly the elderly, have been released from these sites, and some 1,345 families have been so far reunited. Let me assure you, that the Government will continue to address all issues confronting the IDPs in a humane manner and ensure that their temporary stay in these facilities will be as comfortable as possible, in the given situation.

The procedure that is followed in the reception of civilians coming into the cleared areas, their registration and transfer to the IDP transit points and welfare villages is given in the attached briefing note (Annex I).

The Government welcomes the outcome of the informal briefing on Sri Lanka which took place at the UN Security Council last night. In particular, we appreciate the acknowledgement by this premier arm of the UN System, with its overall responsibility for international peace and security, for its forthright condemnation of the LTTE as a terrorist organization and its use of civilians as human shields and not

allowing them to leave the area of conflict. The Government notes with satisfaction that the Security Council members have added their voice to demand the LTTE to lay down its arms and renounce terrorism.

With regard to the call for international monitors and assistance for evacuation of the civilians, the Sri Lankan Government is well engaged with the UN and the ICRC on the humanitarian situation in the North and related matters and therefore does not perceive the necessity for separate roles. In fact, the UN Secretary General has acknowledged that the UN has been in discussion with the Government of Sri Lanka and other concerned parties in recent months and weeks to explore ways in which the suffering of the innocent people in the Vanni region can be brought to an end or lessened.

The LTTE has through its sheer arrogance and intransigence, dissipated its only realistic opportunity of a future role for itself in the democratic polity of Sri Lanka, when it spurned the President's ultimatum to lay down its arms and surrender, which expired at noon on Tuesday, 21st April. As I stated at the outset, the death knell of the LTTE has been sounded; it is simply a matter of time for the LTTE to be consigned into its rightful place as the most ruthless terrorist organization in the world that has failed in history. Future generations of Sri Lankan Tamils will look back at the LTTE, as an organization ostensibly created for the liberation of Tamils, becoming its worst plague, snuffing out the lives of thousands of innocent people from all communities – Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, as well as the cream of the Tamil polity and intelligentsia. It is time to look forward; the international community has a major role to play in the post-conflict phase, in an environment devoid of the violence and terrorism of the LTTE that has been the bane of our beloved motherland in the last three decades.

The Government has in place, an elaborate and comprehensive programme for the rehabilitation of LTTE cadres who have surrendered, under the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation. With larger number of LTTE combatants giving themselves up to the security forces, we also need international assistance to expand and improve these facilities, in order to enable these ex-combatants to be re-integrated with civil society, after a thorough one year residential rehabilitation programme.

I conclude, by calling on the international community to be realistic in their expectations by being in tandem with the ground conditions and not being swayed by erroneous propaganda nor seek to solve their domestic compulsions at the expense of the envisaged agenda of the Sri Lankan government. The world at large must play a complementary role to that of our government, considering it is a war on terror which would provide the environment conducive for a lasting political solution to be evolved.

Thank you.

(Annex I)

Briefing note on IDPs who have entered cleared areas as at 20th April 2009

1. Approximately 100,000 civilians have crossed over to cleared areas since the military launched an operation to rescue the people trapped in the Safe Zone on 20th April. (Data is as of 13.00 hrs on 22.04.09. 92,879 people have been accounted for by this time while a further estimated 7500 persons that have crossed over were awaiting registration).

2. As per records until 22nd April, approximately 170,000 civilians have crossed over from the un-cleared areas since 1st January 2009 (Pl. Refer foot note below).

3. The Security Forces engaged in this humanitarian operation facilitated the arrival of tens of thousands of civilians into military controlled areas as they reached the cleared areas crossing the lagoon in Puthumattalan and Ampalavanpokkanai area.

4. Initially each civilian is given a “pack” of goods, consisting of water bottles, high energy fruit juices, biscuits, dates etc. at the point crossover. They are provided cooked meals during their stay at receiving centres before being accompanied to relief centres at Vavuniya or Jaffna.

5. A civilian crossing over will be initially registered at a receiving centre by the military and then accompanied to relief centres in either Vavuniya or Jaffna. Measures have been taken to send additional buses to transport these civilians.

6. Arrangements have been made by the Ministries of Disaster Relief and Resettlement and Nation Building with the assistance of numerous UN and other aid agencies to look after civilians once they reach Vavuniya. Temporary shelters are being set up in Vavuniya to accommodate these people.

7. Prior to 20th April 2009 the Government had evacuated, with the assistance of the ICRC, a total of 10,086 persons via sea through 23 rescue missions since such sea evacuations began on 10th of February. These were mainly civilians who needed medical attention while a significant number of bystanders were also evacuated.

With the view of improving facilities for the IDP's the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition has taken measures to further improve medical infrastructure of hospitals in the Trincomalee, Vavuniya and Mullaithivu Districts. The hospital in Vavuniya is also provided with additional medical supplies to deal with emergency cases. The administration of the Chettikulam, Pullmudai and Padaviya hospitals has been taken over by the Central Government and these hospitals would be developed expeditiously. Also the Ministry of Health has taken several measures to prevent the spread of epidemics in the relief centres that are housing the displaced persons in Vavuniya. These measures are taken in consultation with NGO's as well as UN agencies such as UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, WHO etc.

Meanwhile Ministry of Health has taken measures to send additional hospital beds to the North and East provinces to cope with the influx of patients.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Colombo

23rd April 2009