

## **Foreign Minister hails armed forces for successful hostage rescue mission**

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has praised the Sri Lankan armed forces for carrying out the largest hostage rescue operation in history by facilitating the flight to freedom of over 100,000 civilians who had been held captive by the LTTE in the no-fire zone (NFZ) on the Mullaitivu coast. The Minister remarked that 102,790 ordinary civilians by voting with their feet to free themselves from LTTE tyranny, have not only demonstrated their total rejection of the LTTE, but also signalled their clear endorsement of the underlying humanitarian objective of the armed forces.

The Foreign Minister made these observations while addressing the diplomatic corps based in Colombo at the Foreign Ministry today (23 April 2009), convened to brief them on the unfolding humanitarian situation in the North, in the wake of the unprecedented exodus of over 100,000 civilians, who have braved the bullets and other forms of violent intimidation unleashed by the LTTE, to flee to the safety of cleared areas, since the early hours of Monday, 20th April 2009.

Speaking further, the Minister dismissed allegations of civilian casualties in the NFZ, being attributed to the security forces. He however noted that civilians had indeed lost their lives in the last few days, when three LTTE suicide bombers had exploded themselves among people who had dared to defy the orders of the LTTE and come over to the cleared areas. Moreover, the LTTE had deliberately targeted civilians who were trying to escape from the NFZ and had in fact shot and killed many of them. This has been clearly borne out by the images captured on the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) over the skies of Mullaitivu. Minister Bogollagama did acknowledge that the LTTE itself had suffered huge casualties in the combat operations launched against them by the security forces, but any suggestion that these casualties were civilians was quite preposterous, especially in the light of the massive influx of civilians breaking through LTTE lines and seeking the sanctuary the security forces in the cleared areas.

The Foreign Minister called on the international community to rally round the Government and tangibly come to the assistance of the thousands of civilians who have come over to the Government held areas. He said that Sri Lanka's 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. He underscored the core aim of the Government being the re-settlement of all those who have been displaced due to the conflict in their original places of habitation. He also sought urgent assistance in mine clearance as well as re-build the war shattered infrastructure in the areas of conflict in the North, in order to expedite the resettlement programme for the IDPs.

Following the positive response voiced by members of the diplomatic corps to support the Government's emergency relief assistance programme for the IDPs, Minister Bogollagama has immediately established an Emergency Task Force headed by Additional Secretary, Ms. Chitranganee Wagswara, which will liaise with other line Ministries and Agencies to identify the immediate and most pressing needs of the people of the IDPs and to coordinate the anticipated inflow of the aid relief.

The Minister, welcoming the outcome of the informal briefing on Sri Lanka which took place at the UN Security Council last night, appreciated 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. He noted with satisfaction that the Security Council members have added their voice to the growing international demand that the LTTE lays down its arms and renounces terrorism.

Minister Bogollagama roundly criticized the LTTE for squandering 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. Noting that the death knell of the LTTE has been sounded, he said that it was 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. The Minister said that it was time to look forward; the international community had 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 Sri Lanka in the last three decades.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Colombo  
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