

## **1. Ban, Sri Lankan leader confer on worsening situation in conflict zone**

9 April 2009 –Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa today discussed the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the north of the island nation, where thousands of civilians are trapped by fighting between the Government and Tamil rebels, agreeing to continue working together in the coming days.

During their telephone conversation, the Sri Lankan leader said that he “understood the Secretary-General’s deep preoccupation with the fate and condition of the civilian population,” UN spokesperson Michele Montas told reporters.

“The Secretary-General reminds all concerned of their obligations to do all they can to protect civilians, and stresses that civilians should be allowed to leave the affected areas” in the Vanni region, she said.

Yesterday, the top UN humanitarian official reiterated his call for a temporary halt in fighting between the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to assist the innocents, warning that “a bloodbath on the beaches of northern Sri Lanka seems an increasingly real possibility.”

The Sri Lankan military has pushed the rebels into an area so small that any shooting or shelling will unavoidably cause casualties among the 150,000 to 190,000 civilians trapped in the same zone, John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, wrote in an opinion piece in *The Guardian*.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), unconfirmed reports suggest that hundreds of civilians have been injured yesterday and today alone in the 14-square kilometre area – roughly the size of Manhattan – of the Vanni designated as a no-fire zone.

“As a full-scale, long-term ceasefire is unlikely to be agreed now, the only way to get the civilians out of harm’s way is a temporary humanitarian lull, during which aid workers and relief supplies must be allowed into the conflict zone, and those who want to leave must be given the chance to do so,” he wrote.

There have been many hundreds of civilian deaths caused by firing from both sides, Mr. Holmes, who also serves as Emergency Relief Coordinator, noted, although exact numbers and who fired what and when are impossible to verify.

“It is clear that the LTTE is refusing to let people flee, though many are managing to escape somehow, and I fear the combatants may be gearing up for a final confrontation,” he stated.

Civilians trapped by the fighting must be allowed a free choice of whether to leave or stay, the official said. “If the LTTE truly has the best interests of the Tamil people at

heart, they should contribute to ending this unnecessary suffering of the civilian population.”

The Sri Lankan Government, for its part, must stick to its promise of not using heavy weapons while the fighting lasts, and hold off from any final attack in the conflict zone while the pause is negotiated, he said.

OCHA said today that over 60,000 people have fled the Vanni region in the past five months, with an average of 700 people escaping the conflict zone last week.

Some 4,000 people have arrived in Vavuniya, where they have joined nearly 60,000 others sheltering in overcrowded camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs).

More than 1,000 metric tonnes of food from the UN World Food Programme (WFP), 35 metric tons of vegetables provided by the Government and other supplies including hygiene kits and bed sheets supplied by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reached the no-fire zone this week.

According to OCHA, civilians trapped in the no-fire zone lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, and medical supplies are urgently needed.