
Sri Lanka urges UN to make categorically clear the need for LTTE to let people go

Tuesday, 03 March 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 04 March 2009

Response of Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat and Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights to the Presentation to the 44th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the UN High Commission for Refugees by Janet Lim, Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific

Madam Chair, Sri Lanka wishes to place on record its appreciation of UNHCR support for our government in its efforts to alleviate the situation of the internally displaced, and to provide them with durable solutions. As you are aware, when we requested others to leave the Vanni, where the LTTE then held full sway, UNHCR was one of the two UN agencies we wanted to remain, along with the World Food Programme, and in addition to the ICRC, because the humanitarian work they were doing was so important that they could have avoided falling prey to the LTTE. Unfortunately, the UN family decided to withdraw everyone, but UNHCR has since been helping us with our Welfare Villages, from the days when only a few thousand people were able to get away from the LTTE. In this connection we must pay particular tribute to the Confidence Building and Stabilization Measures Project that UNHCR initiated a year or so back, which has done much to provide relief and opportunities for self help to our fellow citizens who had suffered so much. In this context, while I welcome the comments of the Director of the Regional Bureau on those who continue to be trapped in the areas of fighting, I believe it would be more helpful to point out who has trapped them and that it is imperative that they be released. This is something we have been requesting for nine months and though, finally, a couple of months ago, the United Nations family in Sri Lanka finally added its voice to ours, this seemed too little too late. Once again, we urge you to make categorically clear the need for the LTTE to let these our people go. We know that this will cause even greater logistical difficulty, for as it is we find it difficult to provide facilities up to our national standards for the 35,000 who did break through, despite LTTE bombs and shooting and grenades, at the beginning of February. But UNHCR has proved very helpful, and is in the forefront of the effort to be prepared as soon as possible for the remaining 70,000 who we believe will soon find their way to freedom from terror. But, whilst expressing our thanks, I was struck in reading the Regional Strategic Presentation Summary of the Bureau of the need for conceptual flexibility in dealing with different circumstances. Sometimes it would seem that the experiences of UNHCR with refugees have made it difficult for some officials to appreciate the distinction between refugees and the internally displaced, and in particular where primary responsibility lies for the latter. In particular we must point out difficulties caused by those who do not understand that all coordination structures must be in cooperation with government, and we cannot allow bodies that are not accountable to set themselves up in judgment on a democratically elected government in the interests of a spurious balance that privileges the antics of terrorists. UNHCR is the partner of government, the preferred partner I should add in such situations, and we therefore expect full consultation, especially over the spending of the generous sum which the Emergency Relief Coordinator Sir John Holmes has granted for the benefit of our suffering citizenry. In this context, we urge UNHCR to rethink its policy of designating only International NGOs as its partners, as sadly it did in Sri Lanka last year. The United Nations must work with government or, since that may not always be feasible, with local organizations whenever possible, non-governmental ones, community based ones, business oriented ones. That will help the nation as a whole to develop capacity at all levels. We appreciate foreign expertise when it is essential, but when this means a high proportion of funds meant to benefit our people instead winging its way westward, we would prefer it if a concerted effort were made to ensure, not only value for money, but also encouragement of national talent. We look forward therefore to the partnerships that we believe the United Nations system is all about, to more thorough consultation, and to ensuring that our people, so long the victims of terrorism, so long prevented from returning to their homes, will derive maximum benefit from the generosity of the United Nations, and the people all over the world whom it represents. Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations Geneva 3rd March 2009