
SRI LANKA: UN denounces misuse of food destined for children

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COLOMBO (IRIN) - The UN has deplored the diversion of high-energy therapeutic food supplies intended for severely malnourished children to Liberation Tigers of Tamils Eelam (LTTE) fighters in combat zones in Sri Lanka's north. A statement released on 11 March by the UN country office in Sri Lanka said that BP-100 high-energy biscuits found in the possession of a dead Tamil Tiger came from supplies targeted at severely malnourished children.

"The UN deplores that such life-saving items, destined for severely malnourished children, were diverted from their intended purpose," the statement said. "The last shipment of BP-100 was sent with all due government authorisations by the UN Children's Fund [UNICEF] to the Ministry of Health Regional Directors of Health Services in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu in June 2007, for the treatment of severely malnourished children in those districts." The UN statement said "the treatment of malnutrition among children remains a priority for Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health, UNICEF and the World Food Programme". The latest UNICEF humanitarian update of 4 March stated that nutritional levels in the war-affected areas of Sri Lanka are still lower than the national average due to the conflict and lack of supplies. "There is a dire lack of clean water, food, proper sanitation and medicine. In turn this has further worsened the nutritional status of affected populations, with malnutrition rates in the north higher than the national average," the report stated. Heavy fighting between government forces and the LTTE in the northern Vanni Pocket, Mullaitivu District, has forced thousands to flee. The UNICEF report estimated that between 150,000 and 200,000 civilians were trapped by the fighting inside a narrowing combat zone of about 50 sqkm. More than 36,000 have escaped the fighting into government areas since January 2009. Evacuation cancelled The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said its latest attempts to evacuate sick and wounded civilians out of the combat zone by sea was postponed on 11 March due to lack of security guarantees from the two parties to the conflict. "We did not receive the proper security guarantees to proceed with the evacuation," Sarasi Wijeratne, ICRC spokeswoman, told IRIN. "We will try to go ahead with it as soon as we receive the guarantees." The ICRC started evacuating sick and wounded civilians by sea on 10 February when overland convoys could not proceed due to security fears. In eight sea evacuations, more than 2,700 sick and wounded civilians and their relatives were evacuated from Putumattalan, at the edge of the combat zone, south to Trincomalee District, in government-controlled areas. "This is a vital lifeline into the areas of fighting and we will make our best efforts to maintain it," she said.

Bad weather The sea route has also been used to send food supplies and medicine to the combat zones, but Wijeratne said the latest supply ship returned to Trincomalee without offloading its full cargo. A ship carrying 500MT of supplies, the largest single consignment by sea, was advised to return to Trincomalee on 9 March by the Sri Lanka Navy due to bad weather. It had offloaded about 140MT when it returned. "It was a government vessel that was carrying supplies from the government and the ICRC was escorting it under its flag," Wijeratne said. She told IRIN the ICRC planned to deliver the remaining supplies once the weather cleared. Obviously we would need security assurances from both parties for the supply ship to also make the trip." Courtesy: irinnews.org