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## Terrorists versus Civilians

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It seems as though every man and his dog is worried about Sri Lankan civilians. Opening a newspaper without running into a statement expressing concern at their fate is almost impossible now, and not only in this country. Our civilians are on the minds of the entire world community, apparently from Great Danes to Yorkshire Terriers, and words of concern just keep flooding out of their mouths.

If this attention helped to relieve suffering, or saved even one life, the Government would be delighted. Civilians are not just our responsibility, they are our voters. The Government has a vested interest in their wellbeing, and we intend to provide them with all they need to get by while this struggle with terrorism is going on. Sadly, most of the interjections achieve no such thing. They call on both sides to make sure we are adhering to international law on safeguarding civilians during wars, sometimes denouncing particular acts as obviously wrong. For example, many agencies and individuals have now condemned the LTTE for holding civilians against their will, for child recruitment and for suicide bombings. Such denunciations are useful. But the writers and speakers of the pious words of advice fairly often say, or sometimes just imply, that there isn't much of a difference between the Government and the LTTE, and that the plight of civilians is effectively the fault of both sides. This is nonsense, as we have said on occasions too numerous to count. And the facts back us up. If the Government were as indifferent to the fate of civilians as the LTTE, this conflict would have been over long ago. We could have destroyed the entire safe zone in which cadres are now hiding out, reducing everything there to dust. Indeed, we needn't have bothered to declare a safe zone. No soldiers would have been killed, because the Air Force could have littered the place with bombs from the safety of great heights, as others do on a regular basis in their struggles with terrorism elsewhere. It would have been easy, if the LTTE example had been followed by the Government. Observers don't take this argument seriously enough. Democratically elected governments can't be judged according to the same criteria as terrorists, they claim, because they have greater responsibilities to the people. It certainly makes a difference to the legitimacy of the struggle. The Government has been elected to look after the country and its citizens, and that includes protecting them from terrorism. This is a responsibility that we take seriously. The LTTE, on the other hand, doesn't represent anybody. It has lost the majority of the support it once enjoyed, precisely because it treats people with contempt. Furthermore, there are plenty of good reasons for comparing tactics. War crimes are the responsibility of individuals. Whether the person committing them is a terrorist or a democratically elected politician makes no difference when they come to be judged for their actions. Hitler would not have been handled any differently on the basis that he turned Germany into a one party state, because more relevant was the fact that he gassed six million Jews. It would be unthinkable to suggest that we couldn't have expected any better from him, given that he was a dictator. Similarly, terrorists ought not to be let off the hook just because they don't hold any official positions. The LTTE thinks nothing of killing civilians, as we know only too well. It has deliberately targeted countless numbers, sending in dozens of brainwashed individuals, including children, to blow themselves up amongst the innocent. They have struck in buses and trains, amongst worshippers of different faiths, at political rallies and a lot more. Even the people the LTTE claims to be liberating are not exempt from its barbarism, as has become very obvious in recent days with hundreds of civilians being shot for attempting to escape to Government controlled areas. Tactics are devious too, and this is where observers have tended to lose their way of late. The LTTE does everything possible to make sure that civilians are thrust in between its cadres and the Army. Its decision to stop civilians leaving the Vanni was designed to create such a buffer. But less obvious strategies are being used too. Bunkers are dug in the middle of civilian dwellings, while concealed artillery positions are put up alongside. Military hardware is kept nearby. The LTTE launches shells from among civilians, actually hoping to draw return fire. It has even fired its own heavy weapons into civilian areas, presumably just to be able to say that the Army has targeted them. The difference in approach is obvious. The Army doesn't try to use civilians to protect its soldiers, most importantly because it is committed to international humanitarian law, but also practically because it knows that the LTTE wouldn't hesitate to shoot through the civilians. Contrariwise, the LTTE knows that the Army does stop and think when civilians get in the way, indeed that its operations are severely curtailed as a result. The LTTE is completely focused on propaganda these days. It knows that the battle will be lost if outside support isn't forthcoming, so it is directing all its efforts to the diaspora, and through them to the rest of the world. The LTTE is desperate to create the impression that a lot of people are dying, and it is willing to kill civilians itself when it can't fool the Army into doing it by mistake. Only if the LTTE does this effectively is there a chance that other countries will try to intervene in the war. Observers sometimes accept that this is the case, but then argue that the LTTE wouldn't feel compelled to do any such thing if the Government weren't trying to recapture the territory that it considered its own. We all know what the LTTE is like, they say, blaming the Government for pushing a group of terrorists into a corner. This is rather crass, of course. Such people can't be allowed to do as they wish. When the LTTE was sitting pretty in Kilinochchi, with thousands of square kilometres under its control and no military operations to bother it, it was still killing people. Furthermore, it was busy constructing defences, acquiring planes, boats and submarines, making bombs and forcing people to learn how to explode them. The LTTE was preparing to kill an awful lot more people, in other words. The Government didn't launch this military action enthusiastically, but in response to a long series of provocations that couldn't be ignored. We tried negotiations, but the LTTE demonstrated time and again that it wasn't serious in reaching a deal. It is even less interested in talking now, because it realises that it has lost the place it usurped for itself as sole representative of the Tamils. Since Muralitharan and Chandrakanthan joined forces with the Government, and as others like Devananda look forward to greater room to manoeuvre in future, the LTTE has been recognised for the fringe group that it has long been. There is now less hope than ever of Prabhakaran getting his own state to misrule, so intransigence rules. In the circumstances, options are limited. The Government is doing whatever possible to save the lives and relieve

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the suffering of the civilians trapped in the conflict zone by the LTTE. Officials work continuously to get food and medicines in, despite logistical problems. Military operations are going on carefully, while air strikes and the use of heavy weapons have been curtailed. The Government can't ensure that no more civilians will die, at least not while the LTTE is still in business, but we are doing our best. Sometimes nothing more is possible. Communications Division Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process Courtesy: SCOPP