SRI LANKA: Thousands flee conflict-hit north

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COLOMBO (IRIN) - Thousands of civilians escaped fighting in the north over the weekend, according to official sources, as the UN warned of deteriorating conditions for those still trapped in the combat zone.

More than 3,000 people crossed into government-controlled areas in the Puthukkudiyiruppu area, the Defence Ministry reported. On 21 March alone, more than 1,100 civilians fled, many of them children, according to the ministry, despite heavy artillery and mortar fire in the area. On 22 March, another 890 escaped fighting overland in the same area. Some 108 people, who had fled the fighting in six dinghies flying white flags, were rescued by the Sri Lankan Navy near the village of Chundikulam, north of the combat zone, on 21 March. Since 15 March, more than 7,000 Tamil civilians have crossed into government areas, according to official statistics, bringing to nearly 50,000 the number being housed at transit camps and welfare centres in the northern districts of Mannar, Jaffna and Vavuniya since December. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said it had evacuated by sea, with the help of the Navy, more than 5,000 sick and wounded civilians and caregivers from Putumattalan, a village at the edge of a no-fire zone, to Trincomalee town in government areas, since 10 February. The latest group of more than 490 patients and caregivers was evacuated on 22 March, the Navy said. The ICRC said the ship had also carried medical supplies into the combat zone. The fleeing civilians were among tens of thousands trapped by heavy fighting between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the narrow Vanni Pocket, Mullaithivu District. The UN estimates that 150,000 to 200,000 people remain trapped in the combat zone in the Vanni Pocket, while the government puts the figure at closer to 70,000. Squalid conditions Gordon Weiss, the UN spokesman in Sri Lanka, told IRIN the civilians fleeing heavy fighting had poured into the 14km no-fire zone along the coast at the eastern edge of the combat zone. "Most civilians have been there for about six weeks now, living shoulder-to-shoulder," he said. "Conditions are dangerously squalid, with very limited food, medical help, or clean water, and shells falling among packed shelters. The LTTE are also recruiting civilians by force, including young children," he added. The ICRC earlier said a lack of safe drinking water and proper sanitation was increasing the risk of epidemics in the no-fire zone. "Tens of thousands of people confined to a rapidly shrinking area have headed for the coast to escape the fighting, in search of safety, food and medical care. But numbers in the coastal belt held by the LTTE have increased drastically over recent weeks, and clean water is scarce," it said in its latest operational update released on 17 March.

UN local staff recruited Meanwhile, the UN has yet to receive a response to the request for the LTTE to release two UN local staff members and three dependants, including a 16-year-old girl, forcibly recruited. "We have not heard any response from the LTTE about the staff members or their family members; they remain forcibly recruited," Weiss said. The two staff members and the dependants were recruited this month and the UN officially protested to the LTTE on 16 March and requested they be released immediately. Courtesy: Irinnews.org