
Ceasefire would not help save the civilians

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By Neville Ladduwahetty The EU, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and six US Senators have called for a cease-fire to the conflict in Sri Lanka. A cease-fire is expected to provide an opportunity to evacuate the civilians held hostage as a human shield by the LTTE. Since this suggestion has originated from responsible sources with authority, it is necessary to explore whether a cease-fire would in fact save the civilians given the particularities of the context, namely, that they are being held hostage for the specific purpose of providing protection as a "human shield" for the LTTE.

This protective shield consists of two categories of civilians: those held forcibly against their will, and those loyal to the LTTE that they would willingly stay to the bitter end. It is only the first category who would want to be saved and who could be saved. Since no one would know how many civilians are in each category, it is not possible to know how many could be saved. If this first group is significantly larger than the second, evacuating them would place the LTTE open to the onslaught of the security forces. The track record of the LTTE throughout this conflict has been that their safety has always come before all other considerations. As such, cease-fire or no cease-fire, the LTTE would do everything in its power to retain their hold on all the civilians regardless of whether they wish to escape or not. The civilians have thus become the only bargaining chip in the LTTE's final arsenal both militarily and as a means to elicit humanitarian concern globally. It is recognition of the strategic value of these civilians that makes them fire on any who attempt to escape and even resort to displaying bodies of killed escapees as a deterrent to others. Those who propose a cease-fire to evacuate the civilians trapped by the LTTE seem to have missed these ground realities, or have decided to ignore them for reasons known only to them. This human shield is used to the full advantage of the LTTE. Both in the use of small arms as well as with heavy artillery fired from amidst the civilians, the LTTE is in a position to inflict considerable damage and dent the military offensive, while denying the security forces from responding in equal measure because of the presence of the civilians. It is apparent that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is not mindful of these ground realities, since her statement considers both parties guilty of war crimes, thus equating strategies adopted by security forces with those adopted by the LTTE. With this clear difference in "intent" towards the civilians, the inability to recognize contrast in the strategies of the security forces and the LTTE calls their competency into question. The compulsion for the security forces to adopt soft strategies because of the government policy to minimize harming the civilians to the maximum extent possible is not acknowledged by INGOs and foreign media as well. By describing the security forces and the LTTE as "parties to the conflict", agencies such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International and foreign media have equated the strategies instead of recognizing the significance of the differences. Reports regarding attacks on hospitals are sent without verification, and when subsequently are proven to be false never follow with retraction or apology. If concern for civilians is truly humanitarian and not political, there must be a unified outcry against the LTTE. The lack of it demonstrates a deplorable complicity with the LTTE, and a clear disingenuousness. The civilians's plight would not be any different if the Government resorted to a unilateral pause in the offensive. It would only give the LTTE the opportunity to regroup and become re-energized; and prolong the agony of the civilians. Their status would remain unchanged as they continue to be the human shield for the LTTE. This reality must be recognized by those who advocate a pause in the offensive. To the LTTE, the civilians are an integral part of the campaign to prolong the conflict in the hope of working out an exit strategy, while to the rest of the world, these civilians are innocent non-combatants. Consequently, to the world community it is a humanitarian issue but to the LTTE they are a human weapon. The concern of the International Community suits the agenda of the LTTE to a tee, and this perspective is being exploited by the LTTE. An inability to comprehend that the civilians are a part of the LTTE's defense system is what permits proposals such as a cease-fire, humanitarian intervention or a pause in the conflict to save the civilians. Attempts to deny this defense shield by force, such as forced evacuation would be resisted by the LTTE resulting in more harm to the civilians. It may appear to be heartless to do nothing, but the most effective strategy is to permit the security forces to progressively weaken the LTTE; leading to a situation that would give courage to civilians to defy the LTTE and flee to save themselves. Instances of such courage are regularly reported, but many fall prey to the LTTE's firings to prevent them leaving. If the military's strategy is permitted to play out it would have a snow-balling effect and more and more opportunities will be created for the daring civilians to escape. This is the only pragmatic way to handle this crisis as demonstrated by over 52,000 plus daring civilians. The plight of civilians in conflict makes war horrible in any circumstance, but when deliberately and intentionally used en masse it is a crime against humanity, in this case inflicted by the LTTE's ruthless leaders. Courtesy: Island.lk