
UN Resident Coordinator unable to vouch for civilian casualty figures

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The UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in Sri Lanka, Neil Buhne, has stated that he is unable to confirm the veracity of the figures of civilian casualties since 20th January 2009 in the conflict area of Mullaitivu District, contained in an official report issued by his Office recently. He made this disclosure at a meeting yesterday (24th March 2009) with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rohitha Bogollagama held at the Foreign Ministry, in response to a query from the Minister.

The Foreign Minister informed Mr Buhne that the figures of 2,683 civilian deaths and 7,241 injuries cited in the report titled, “Sri Lanka | Civilian casualties Vanni Overview| March 2009” emanating from his Office, have not been attributed to any reliable or independent source. The assertion in the report that two thirds of the documented casualties had occurred in the NFZ (no-fire zone) is patently false, since the security forces take extra-ordinary precautions to avoid causing civilian casualties, including exercising maximum restraint in not resorting to retaliatory fire at the LTTE, which has brazenly violated International Humanitarian Law by directing fire at the Government troops from artillery guns and heavy weapons that it had deliberately positioned among the civilians within the NFZ. Moreover, the Government with the assistance of the ICRC has up to 18th March evacuated by sea, 4,120 sick and injured persons, as well as 1,485 accompanying carers. This has been corroborated by the ICRC in a report issued on 17th March 2009. It is self-evident that only after all sick and injured persons have been accommodated from the conflict area, that accompanying carers would have been taken on board. Thus, the figure of 7,241 injuries also cannot be credibly established. Therefore, the Government of Sri Lanka categorically rejects the report, which has unfortunately received wide circulation within the international community. Mr Buhne acknowledged that the report had been prepared by his Office, and was meant only for circulation among the donor community, but could not independently verify the authenticity of the figures of civilian casualties mentioned in the report. Minister Bogollagama expressed his deep displeasure at such unsubstantiated information being incorporated in an official report of the UN, which would ipso facto lend it credence. He urged the UN Resident Coordinator to issue a formal clarification on this matter, in order to rectify the negative and damaging inferences that may be drawn from the said report. Foreign Secretary, Dr Palitha Kohona and senior officials of the Foreign Ministry were present at the meeting. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Colombo 25 March 2009