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## Disarm or Perish – UN Security Council tells the Tamil Tigers

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Disarm or Perish was what the UN Security Council told the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam at the conclusion of an interactive discussion. At the discussion held last week (March 26) Under Secretary General Sir John Holmes and H.M.G.S. Paliakkara, Sri Lanka Ambassador to UN talked to members of the Security Council concerning the plight of the civilians who are held by LTTE as human shields.

At a seminar discussion with Council members, they discussed assistance being provided to the civilians held by the LTTE in safe zone area and on the welfare facilities to the IDPs who managed to escape from the stranglehold of the Tigers. The meeting was described as an ‘interactive’ one held outside the Security Council’s formal structures as Sri Lanka is not on Security Council agenda and the LTTE should not be given any legitimacy of Council’s consideration. The briefing and the interactive discussion indicated grave concern of all the members of the Security Council over the LTTE’s intransigence in not allowing the civilians move out of harm’s way and their continued recruitment of underage children in the safe zone and the use of civilians as a human shield. The key Council members who spoke to media were clear in calling on the LTTE to disarm and surrender as the quickest way to end conflict. They also upheld the legitimate right of a Government to defend itself from terrorist threat. None of the Security Council members favored a formal consideration of the issue as an agenda item of the Council as the LTTE is listed as a terrorist group in many member states. It is also not a matter that has international peace and security implications and the interactive discussion was merely to receive information from OCHA and from the Government of Sri Lanka on the humanitarian efforts by the Government and by UN, ICRC and other agencies. There was unanimous perception that the LTTE must accept reality and agree for ending the conflict through disarmament and discussing the future of their cadres. Grave concern was also expressed about the LTTE’s activities in violation of UN Resolutions especially the Security Council resolutions on illicit trafficking of weapons, child soldiers, illicit fund raising. The Jane’s Defense weekly magazine had estimated LTTE fund raising at around US Dollars 300 million. Many member states also felt that LTTE should not be given another opportunity to regroup and rearm. Prevent emergence of a political solution and democratic Tamil leadership and hence it would be undesirable to provide the LTTE with such opportunity through unverifiable and unenforceable ceasefire. Concerns were expressed about casualties and the need to bring a swift end to the conflict and to take all precautions to minimize harm to civilians and respect international law in that regard. Member states acknowledged the measures taken by the Sri Lankan Government to ensure delivery of food and the essential supplies to the trapped civilians and for provision of facilities at IDP centers for civilians escaping from the clutches of the LTTE. Given below are the transcripts of the comments made by Sri Lanka’s Ambassador H.M.G.S. Paliakkara at the Media conference, after the interactive discussion with UN Security Council members on the situation of Sri Lanka on 26.3.2009

Ambassador Paliakkara: We had a good interactive discussion. It was not a council meeting. It was information Sir John Holmes provided, the OCHA prospective, for two reasons: one is that the Council did not want to take the LTTE equation into Council consideration because LTTE would like to have that kind of a situation because the International community has called on the LTTE, the quickest and the best way to end the conflict is to disarm and consider modalities for surrendering cadres, international other considerations they would like very much because they can say the civilian population don’t have to leave, we don’t have to consider surrendering weapons so we can hold on to these people and continue to fight. And secondly of course Government of Sri Lanka shares the humanitarian consideration, a huge consideration. And it is a huge concern. So it was good opportunity for us to exchange views with the Council members and appreciate the problems we encounter and try to work out solutions to that. So in that respect it was a good discussion. Questions posed by journalists and answers given by Ambassador Paliakkara

Question: Ambassador, are you willing to have a humanitarian pause, brief perhaps, to allow civilians to come out and if not why not? Ambassador Paliakkara: Coming out civilians is a top priority for the Government. As you know, Government has earlier declared, I don’t want to go into the terminology, Government has earlier declared a no fire period of 48 hours. If the LTTE is ready to let the civilians go today, I will persuade my Government to agree to any modality you can call it a pause or something else that is how it is. So that is the issue.

Question: US Ambassador Dicarolo had just said that the Government is not in fact using heavy artillery and bombing near hospitals. So I just want to know what is your response to that also your Foreign Minister has said that no member State of the UN has in any way critical of Sri Lanka’s conduct of the conflict. Do you maintain that or after the meeting do you agree that sort of friendly sense here? Ambassador Paliakkara: I don’t know what the Foreign Minister said I will ask him and come back to you. But on the issue of heavy weapons, it has been very clearly stated that military have very categorically said that they are not firing heavy weapons into the safe zone and they had said that the forces have come so close to the safe zone there is no military sense in firing at such short range heavy weapons. Because what remains are kind of a house to house combat situation. But the Government has told them not to go into the safe zone, because of the civilians’ presence. As you know, the Military has completed the rest of the operation within about two months about 4,000 sq. km area and if they were allowed to go on the same pace they would have taken this remaining 25 sq km in 3 days. But the Government has said don’t do that. So they are not using heavy weapons. As you know, LTTE is firing from the no fire zone, there may have been occasions I don’t know, I am speculating, there may have been occasions where these automatic return fire, may have. But Government forces are not firing deliberately but this is still speculation. Because you are depending on LTTE sources to, everyone is depending on LTTE sources to make this contention.

Question: On the issue of the humanitarian pause, you said that you were willing to persuade your Government to accept on. I was told inside you have expressed concern that such a pause could be used by the separatists to rearm. Is that a concern and could this work against any kind of temporary ceasefire? Ambassador Paliakkara: Thank you for rephrasing what I said. Let me say what I said. I told you the issue is not the pause or

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whatever, issue is, if the LTTE is ready to let these people go, at least part of them go, I will persuade my Government to agree to a modality to facilitate that. You can call it a pause or... As I said, Government has earlier given no fire period 48 hours, issue is LTTE is not willing to let them go they are trying to hold this human shield, but we are working on that. If they are reasonable if the LTTE is the representative of the Tamil people they claim to be, they should at least let part of them go and we are working on that. Question: There was an OCHA document that came out talking about 2,683 civilians dead between Jan. and March 7. Are you saying that those figures only come from Tamil sources or Tamil Tiger sources? There seems to be an OCHA document talking about in reporting network. What is your understanding of the number of civilians actually killed in the zone of conflict? Ambassador Palihakkara: On the OCHA document, I think you should ask OCHA. But in terms of civilian casualties, the Government is very seriously concerned about, if there are civilian casualties and there ought to be casualties because the LTTE has the habit of firing from safe zone, firing from among civilians, and then there may have been one or two occasions where return fire may have caused civilian casualties. But I cannot give you a number. But the priority now is not really to go on counting the number of casualties, but try and save remaining civilians that is the priority. We are in fact sending food, medicines and other things knowing fully well that at least 30 per cent of that is expropriated by the LTTE, but there is no option but to do that because there are civilians. Question: How long these camps that have been set up, how long these IDPs be confined, without being able to receive visitors, or to leave the detention camps. Some have raised the concern that they are detention camps or there is freedom of movement. How long will that last? Ambassador Palihakkara: You mean in the long-term resettlement or the immediate transit situation? Question: Any restriction on those who want to leave anywhere they choose? Ambassador Palihakkara: There is a issue, which is that, you know, it is a large influx. And that we are working with UNHCR and OCHA. This was also discussed a little while ago, to improve access. Right now as Sir John Holmes said at the meeting and here, there is access, full access to transit camps. And then what we are working on is to reduce the military presence further. Because the Resettlement and Rehabilitation Ministry is progressively taking over, that is the Ministry in charge of the IDP camps. On the long term our goal is to resettle at least 80 per cent of them within a year. Question: There were some questions raised about a newspaper editor that was arrested and said that he supported the Tamils. Various press freedom groups have raised objections. And lastly, if you don't mind, what is the plan in terms of trying to have a political process with Tamil people in Northern Sri Lanka. What is your idea trying to get underline process? Ambassador Palihakkara: President has already initiated a major Tamil party conference. His idea is to get the Democratic Tamil parties, including those who may represent some of the views of the LTTE. But their Parliamentary representative into a process to discuss devolution scheme, which can be, you know will be the aftermath of this military activities. So that you invest your security gains in a political process. Question: I understand that the Government forces are only a kilometer away from the no fire zone. How soon we can expect the final offensive against the Tamil Tigers? Ambassador Palihakkara: I am a diplomat. I don't like to talk about offensives. The forces are perhaps closer than to the safe zone that you said. In certain places I think they are closer than one kilometer even. Government is not talking about, to my knowledge any final offensive. Their priority right now is to get these people out. The people who are held hostage by the LTTE and there is lot of pressure on LTTE by people like you, the media and by others. I hope you do that more, like you pressure the Government, you must put pressure on LTTE. Media plus the diaspora groups and international community. Today, I think there was a near unanimous view that the quickest way to get this conflict ended is for LTTE to lay down arms and let those people, move at least those people who are willing to move that is the priority now. Government is not talking about final offensive. If it were, it would have allowed the forces to continue the pace at which they were proceeding. As you know, they have cleared nearly 9000 sq. km in a matter of months. If they had allowed them to proceed they could have just gone over. Question: Could you explain on the arrest of the newspaper editor&hellip;? Ambassador Palihakkara: I don't know, is this about Udayan&hellip;..? yes, there was the authorities have said that he has, there has been some evidence that he was involved in some way about this, you remember the LTTE air raid in Colombo, unsuccessful. So it is before that Attorney General if he can find evidence to support that charge, he will be prosecuted or otherwise has to be released. Question: How soon? Ambassador Palihakkara: I think you must be fair by me. I am not an astrologer. Courtesy: Island.lk