
Humanitarian pause

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President Mahinda Rajapaksa's directive to the Sri Lankan armed forces to observe a 48-hour pause in their victorious offensive operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam may be "less than the full humanitarian pause of several days" pressed for by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon but it will be greeted with relief worldwide. Coinciding with the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, this concession from a position of total military dominance is aimed at securing safe passage for an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 civilians.

The plain truth is that they are held hostage by the LTTE in a 17 square kilometer sliver of coastal land in the North that has been demarcated by the government as a No Fire Zone (NFZ). The Tigers have lost no less than 15,000 square km of territory that was in their military control when the current war began in August 2006. As Velupillai Prabhakaran's dream of winning "Tamil Eelam" through armed struggle turned into a nightmare for Tamils trapped or displaced from their homes in the conflict zone, he and the remnants of his battle-hardened cadre have had nowhere to turn. Facing annihilation, they have had no moral compunction in moving into the NFZ with heavy weapons, and using the hard-pressed civilians as a last-ditch shield. Refusing to acknowledge the very idea of a humanitarian NFZ, they have made it clear that the lives and welfare of Tamils, whose sole representative the LTTE claims to be, just do not count in this horrible travesty of a liberation struggle. There can be no other explanation for this refusal to heed international humanitarian appeals. The 65,000 Tamils who have escaped to government-controlled areas since November 2008 give the lie to the LTTE's claim that the Tamil people are staying with it voluntarily. Mr. Ban Ki-moon has struck the right note at the right time by calling on "key members of the international community" to support this pause and do all they can "to avert further death and suffering in Sri Lanka." It should not be too difficult to persuade the Sri Lankan government to extend the pause to the "several days" Mr. Ban wanted if it means stepping up the international pressure on the LTTE and giving it no choice but to allow civilians "wishing to leave the conflict zone... to do so without hindrance." That is the real solution to the humanitarian crisis. It will inevitably mean the final defeat of, or surrender by, the LTTE leaders. Sri Lanka's Tamils certainly have longstanding grievances. The Tamil question can be resolved only through their winning equal rights and genuine devolution of power along federal lines in their areas of historical habitation. But what the world needs to be clear about is that the LTTE, far from being an effective instrument of a just political struggle, has been the biggest obstacle in the way of Tamils winning their demands within a united Sri Lanka. Courtesy: Hindu.com