"LTTE more actively prevented people leaving during pause" - John Holmes

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"Forced recruitment of civilians, including children, to fight or work for the LTTE, continues" "There seems to be less civilians getting out during the [New Year] pause than before. So it is clear that LTTE did not allow those who wished to leave even if they wished to leave the area during this pause to do so, they seemed to be actively prevented from doing so, perhaps more actively prevented from doing so during this pause, so that is a matter for great regret," said Sir John Holmes, UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs at a briefing on the situation in Sri Lanka at the UN, New York, April 15.

"We believe they should be allowing people, encouraging people to leave the no fire zone. Civilians should not be used as pawns or human shields in this way. So we call on the LTTE very strongly to change their attitude to this and to allow those who wish to leave, which we believe is the vast majority at least, and to do so as soon as possible to get them out of harms way," he added. Responding to a question by the media on what evidence do UN has that these people actually would like to get out, the John Holmes said: "The UN agencies, International committee of the Red Cross and our staff and people, when they came out of the LTTE hold they made it absolutely clear that people were being held against their will. They had to flee and if they try to leave they are being fired upon. When they try to flee, huge pressure is put on them against their leaving like forced recruitment of the civilians including children against their will, to fight or work for the LTTE. There may be some immediate family members who may stay but overwhelming majority would want to get out at least for safety reasons irrespective of political reasons." Answering another question whether the UN is calling for a ceasefire, he said: "Regarding a ceasefire, what we have done is to call consistently for a peaceful and orderly end to hostilities and to that end to call for a humanitarian pause which we hope could be transformed into something lasting. It is pretty clear frankly however that a ceasefire is not something that is available in the present circumstances. We are trying to do something realistic in the present circumstances." Asked how many people have been killed and injured, John Holmes said: "You cannot give verifiable figures. Dozens may be killed per day. It goes up some days, it goes down other days. There were reports 50 - 60 killed or injured and other days it is less but we cannot verify.' With regard to medical and halt conditions in the NFZ he said there may be water borne diseases. However, there is no danger epidemic at the moment. His full response was: "There are some rudimentary medical facilities in the zone. There are some doctors, some medical supplies have been delivered, we need to get more urgently. Red Cross ship arrives every two or three days taking supplies, the patients are brought to better facilities for treatment in Trincomalee and Vavuniya. Poor water quality, poor nutrition may give rise to disease etc. Because there is no supply of antibiotics, sometimes amputations have to be carried out. There may be water borne diseases. However, there is no danger epidemic at the moment." Here is the text of the Opening Statement by the UN Under Secretary-General: Let me try to give you an update on where we stand on the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka, in particular, in the very small pocket of land where the fighting is continuing in the so-called no fire zone and the plight of the many civilians trapped there, I believe about 100,000 people are still trapped there and I think the first thing to say is that we warmly welcome the pause in offensive military operation announced by the Government at the beginning of the week. It was a valuable first step and we hoped that it would allow more trapped civilians to leave the conflict area in safety, and it provided a respite for the civilian population from the fighting and the deaths and injuries that it causes, we also hoped that it would be possible to get more aid into the area and also for humanitarian actors themselves to be able to get into look at the situation accompanying with aid and assess the needs of the population in this no fire zone. I think the Secretary-General himself made it clear in the statement that he made at that time, that he would have liked a longer pause, a longer humanitarian pause, a proper humanitarian pause and preferably one agreed by both sides for more days than two. Nevertheless we welcome this 48 hour pause and we hope that this would allow progress in the various areas we have outlined. Now it is clear that 48-hour was not long enough to allow us to get in significant amounts of more aid or indeed to allow visits by humanitarian workers to the area and unfortunately it is also clear that not only did this not allow more civilians to get out, there seems to be less civilians getting out during the pause than before. So it is clear that LTTE did not allow those who wished to leave even if they wished to leave the area during this pause to do so, they seemed to be actively prevented from doing so, perhaps more actively prevented from doing so during this pause, so that is a matter for great regret. We believe they should be allowing people, encouraging people to leave the no fire zone. Civilians should not be used as pawns or human shields in this way. So we call on the LTTE very strongly to change their attitude to this and to allow those who wish to leave, which we believe is the vast majority at least and to do so as soon as possible to get them out of harms way. The fighting according to latest reports has now resumed, including in the no fire zone which is effectively the only area now occupied by the LTTE as was always. It was always very difficult for us from the outside to say who started the firing and exactly what is happening, who is firing where, but unfortunately it seems that the casualty toll is once again rising and that is a very worrying situation for that very large civilian population who are trapped there. So we hope that there will be some kind of extension or possibly a renewal of this humanitarian pause again, a pause in military operation so that the civilians will have a further respite and there is more chances and they will be able to get out of harms way and get out of firing and the fighting and to safety. In addition, obviously if there was a longer pause for more days, it would have given us a better chance of getting more aid in and better chance of getting humanitarian aid workers into the area. I think during the pause, the International Red Cross was able to get a ship in there as they have been doing regularly, even before the pause but they were able to do it more easily and with a greater degree of safety, otherwise than if the pause had not existed; it enabled them to evacuate casualties and bringing some supplies at the same time. We hope that there will be a further World Food Programme ship arriving in the no fire zone to unload food later this week, I hope, setting off tomorrow again and taking in large amounts of food which are desperately needed because although supplies have increased in recent weeks as I have said, food supplies have increased in recent weeks

but there is nothing likely sufficient for the population and we are also extremely concerned about the availability of medical supplies and also the availability of shelter and clean water and other essential supplies for the people who are trapped there. Let me repeat that it is essential for all concerned to do everything they can to save civilian lives in this area, to protect the civilians in this area and I call on the Government once again to live up to the promises they made on repeated occasions not to use heavy weapons in this area and I am afraid they have been doing that in some respects and that's what that is obviously one of the factors that is causing these civilian casualties. We also take the opportunity to call on the Government again to move faster to address the concerns that we have raised about camps themselves and camps to which those who escaped from the zone are able to get to in terms of civilianization of the management of the camps, freedom of movement for those who are in there, better monitoring of people as they come out of the area, to make sure that the screening is being done in a transparent way and the stories of abuses during the screening process can be effectively dealt with because there would be presence of UN agencies or the International Red Cross at that time and of course it is an important part of this as well at the time the assurances, that the people who are in the camps could be allowed to return to their villages or places of origin as soon as possible, once the fighting is over and after essential task of de-mining has been done. Courtesy: defence.lk