
World comes to Lanka's aid

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By Jamila Najmuddin The government yesterday said the international community had extended overwhelming humanitarian support to Sri Lanka and rejected claims by a top US official that the world was disappointed with efforts by the government to end the war.

Following a briefing to Colombo based diplomats, Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama told reporters that India had already deployed a ship with 40,000 family kits and food packs for the displaced people while several other countries had also pledged similar assistance. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had told lawmakers on Wednesday that Sri Lanka has caused "untold suffering" as it fights Tamil Tiger rebels in what is believed to be the endgame of Asia's longest-running war. "I think that the Sri Lankan government knows that the entire world is very disappointed that in its efforts to end what it sees as 25 years of conflict, it is causing such untold suffering," Clinton said, referring to the thousands of civilians trapped in the war zone. However, Minister Bogollagama reacting to Clinton's statement said the government would not bow down to international pressure and pave way for the LTTE to rise again and said that some countries including the EU had already pledged its support to help the Sri Lankan government look after the civilians who had crossed into government controlled areas after fleeing the LTTE. Elaborating on the countries who had already pledged their support, Minister Bogollagama said that an Indian ship with 40,000 family kits was arriving in the country today, while both the EU and Australia had already pledged cash support. He further said that the US would help the government by sending medical assistance for the IDPs. "These are only a few countries who have come forward. Many more countries have come forward to provide assistance to us at a time when we have almost defeated the LTTE," Minister Bogollagama said. Meanwhile, as the civilian toll who have crossed into government controlled areas reached more than 100,000 yesterday, the government admitted that it had made a statistical error by maintaining that there were only 70,000 civilians remaining in the No-Fire Zone despite the UN maintaining that the numbers were more than 150,000. When questioned on the figures, Minister Bogollagama accepted the error but said that the government could not confirm any numbers as they were not physically present in the area. However Minister Bogollagama said that according to information divulged by the LTTE's media coordinator, Daya Master who surrendered to the security forces on Wednesday, there were only around 15,000 to 20,000 civilians now remaining in the No-Fire Zone. Meanwhile, the government yesterday also called upon the international community to be realistic in their expectations by being tandem with the ground conditions in Sri Lanka and not being swayed by erroneous propaganda. He further said that the international community must not seek to solve their domestic compulsions at the expense of the envisaged agenda of the Sri Lankan government. "The world at large must play a complementary role to that of our government, considering it is a war on terror which would provide the environment conducive for a lasting political solution to be evolved," the Minister told diplomats at the briefing yesterday. Refugees Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama is expected to hold discussions with the French Foreign Minister via telephone today evening following France's request to send boats to Sri Lanka to help rescue the civilians. Minister Bogollagama also spoke to the British Foreign Minister yesterday and the Canadian Foreign Minister on Wednesday evening to brief them on the Lankan situation. France's Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner last week suggested that France and Britain should carry out a joint humanitarian operation in Sri Lanka as, among other things, some of the civilians fleeing the conflict zone in the Wanni are drowning in the sea. Kouchner, had said French and British boats could be deployed to help the IDPs "because these people are on the beaches and some are drowning at sea", he had said.

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