
Sri Lankans tire of foreign meddling

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Civil War; Government ignoring pleas for ceasefire Stewart Bell, National Post With the Tamil Tiger rebels besieged and apparently near collapse after a quarter-century of civil war, the Sri Lankan press have not been kind to nations appealing for a ceasefire. "Get your humanitarian paws off my country," read a headline this week, while a columnist complained about interference by "salmon-eating" countries and an editorial decried "hoity-toity foreign do-gooders."

Bev Oda, Canada's Minister of International Cooperation, is scheduled to arrive in Sri Lanka on Sunday to meet local officials and assess the country's humanitarian needs, her office said yesterday.

Her visit comes at a time of considerable hostility toward what Sri Lankans view as foreign meddling in their affairs. If she intends to press Canada's demand for a halt to fighting, she is unlikely to get a favourable response.

While open to international humanitarian assistance for the almost 200,000 war-displaced now living in overwhelmed temporary camps, the Sri Lankan government made it clear yesterday it was tired of being told to hold its fire on the frontlines. "We have at no time gone for a ceasefire. We will not do so now. There is no time for that now," said President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who predicted the war would be finished in five or six days. He appears to have public backing for his fight against the rebels. His party won two-thirds of the seats in local elections last week, a result the government interpreted as an endorsement of its war policy. Yesterday, only seven square kilometres of the island remained under rebel control but the United Nations estimates 50,000 civilians are still trapped in that area; Sri Lanka says the actual number is smaller. The UN estimates 6,500 civilians have died since January, but Sri Lanka says that figure is also exaggerated and some of those deaths were caused by rebels shooting at them as they fled. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the Sri Lankan Defence Secretary, said in an interview yesterday when the government declared a 48-hour pause in fighting two weeks ago, few civilians escaped the combat zone because they were being forcibly held by the Tamil Tigers. But after the Sri Lankan army blasted an earth barrier built by the rebels, more than 100,000 got out. He said that was evidence military operations were more effective at safeguarding civilians than a ceasefire. If Sri Lankans are determined to ignore the international ceasefire appeals, it may be partly due to past experience. Two decades ago, Sri Lanka was similarly close to defeating the Tamil Tigers, also known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But India intervened, the Tigers survived and the war dragged on. "The fear is that this history will repeat itself, so that's why the determination to keep the international community out until the task of eliminating the LTTE leadership is accomplished," said Jehan Perera, executive director of the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka. That may change once the war is finished, he said. "My hope is that in the next phase the government will not be so opposed to the international community because we do need the international community's assistance if we are to rebuild this country." Courtesy: Nationalpost.com