
UNOSAT Images, Comments on Civilians in NFZ; Partial, Provisional, Unconfirmed- UN Res. Coordinator

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Lakshmi De Silva The UNOSAT images released to the media as well as comments on them regarding civilians in the No Fire Zone (NFZ) are partial, provisional and unconfirmed, says UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Neil Buhne in a letter addressed to Disaster Management and Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe on May 4. Buhne says that he did not authorise the UNOSAT comments as the images and comments on them could be “misinterpreted” as a ‘UN finding’.

According to him the imagery and the commentary have reached the public through a technical fault of posting them without password protection. Hence, when it was found out public access to them was withdrawn, says Buhne. Civilian casualty figures in media: Assessment unreliable, not independent - UN Under Secretary General Lakshmi DE SILVA UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes had clarified that the number of civilians killed and injured reported in certain sections of the media, quoting UN sources cannot be “fully, reliably, and independently assessed, because of limits on access to civilians in the combat zone. Hence they have not been released publicly, and the figures cited were not circulated by this office to diplomatic corps, said a press release issued by UN President and Humanitarian Coordinators office in Colombo on May 7. Certain media reports recently stated that 6,000 civilians in the North had died and 14,000 were injured in attacks by the Armed Forces. The Government rejected the claim and said civilian casualties were due to attacks by the LTTE but not the Armed Forces. However no reliable statistics were available about the number of civilians killed in LTTE attacks on civilians though a number of civilians who fled the LTTE held area in the North had told Government officials and the Armed Forces that LTTE killed or injured a large number of civilians who attempted to cross over to the Government administered areas. In his letter, he states that “satellite imagery is one of the tools and information sources among many and neither it nor any accompanying commentary can represent the overall view of the UN on any particular situation. That comes from statements by the Secretary General or other senior figures. Hence any commentary made by UNOSAT is partial and provisional as are comments made to the media in response to questions made by them. Furthermore satellite data and analysis can only be fully confirmed if cross-checked with ground data, which in this case cannot be done. “With respect to the images that appeared in the media last week, I first saw these only late on April 28. UNOSAT asked our advice on whether the commentary on the images done by them could be shared publicly. Given that this could be misinterpreted as a “UN finding” I did not give them this permission. “However, I have been advised that the imagery and commentary was posted without the password protect it should have and hence reached public. When this was drawn to the attention of UNOSAT, the public access was withdrawn. I have asked my headquarters to inquire into how this happened, subsequent comments made in the media and ways to ensure that our requests of confidentiality are respected in the future,” the letter stated. “Unfortunately most recent images we have is from April 19, before the exodus of tens of thousands of people. We hope to have more recent imagery soon, to help detect how many people are remaining there and to get a better idea of the challenges they face. We would make this information available to you. “I recognise and respect that the Government had requested that we convey information on this issue to the media. “However, after consultation with New York I have been advised that any clarification should be issued from there, given the international awareness of the issue and also that our office had not released the data,” the UN representative’s letter noted. Courtesy: news.lk