Clarifying the Humanitarian Situation in Sri Lanka

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Presentation of Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, at the ‘Sudan, Sri Lanka, CERF Member States Briefing’ conducted by Sir John Holmes, UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief CoordinatorHohh at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Tuesday May 12, 2009. (Edited, incorporating responses to questions)

Thank you, Sir John, for your account of the current situation in Sri Lanka, and your efforts to collect funding to help resolve the problems faced by the displaced. I should note that we would have appreciated greater notice of this briefing, since it is important to make it clear that we are working in partnership. I am happy that OCHA in Sri Lanka, after some years of forgetting this, now recognizes the importance of coordination with government, and working according to government plans and policies, and that from this year, there is much greater attention to transparency and accountability. You were correct to divide the problems into three sections, which need to be dealt with in different ways. Before I look at the most serious of these, the problems faced by the civilians still held by the LTTE, let me concur with the view that the problems of those who managed to flee to refuge with the government have been alleviated to a substantial degree. Though there were difficulties, especially when over 100,000 got away together, these are now much less. In particular, we are grateful to UNHCR which put up tents on sites which the forces cleared by working day and night, so that everyone now has shelter, along with adequate food. Other areas however need more concerted effort. There was much anguish in particular about toilet facilities, which seemed sub-standard. As you may be aware, different cultures have different practices, and water is particularly important to us for hygienic purposes. This may explain why the SPHERE standard of 15 litres a day seems inadequate. The result of current UN dogma is that the very basic toilets initially put up in some places in Zone 2 filled up quickly and became disgusting, and potentially a health hazard. We would therefore urge some flexibility, and structures more like the more decent toilets put up earlier by government in Zone 1. Again, whilst we are very grateful to UNHCR for supplying so many tents so quickly, these are small and low, and it is not correct to expect families to spend much time in them each day, however short their stay. That is why, when these were first mooted instead of the more comfortable structures put up by government in Zone 1, we asked and it was agreed that there should be plenty of open spaces and child learning centres, so that the people could be comfortable and gainfully occupied. These have been slow to come up, and the sites seem covered in tents, so I hope this can be remedied, and work in any other areas be more in line with human dignity from the start. I am glad you clarified the issue of access, since the UN and over 50 agencies are present in force in the camps. I would however ask for caution about an excessive number of expatriates. Given the number of visas approved recently for UN agencies alone, I can see well over a million dollars out of the ten million you kindly granted recently flowing out of the country in the expenses of expatriates. This is why we want transparency and a clear indication of how funds are spent. We appreciate the many countries who have assisted us direct because, while the UN has good experience in these fields, it seems unfair on donors that there is sometimes a bizarre cascade effect whereby donors fund the UN which then subcontracts to international NGOs, which then subcontract to local NGOs, and in this plethora of overheads, the intended recipients of aid get very little of it. If you cannot fund government direct, you should think of funding local NGOs, of which Sri Lanka has several with solid experience, instead of multiplying the number of those who have to be paid expatriate level salaries. To turn now to the civilians still trapped by the LTTE, there is no doubt that the best way for them to be saved is for the LTTE to lay down its arms and surrender, as has so clearly been advocated by the G8, the Co-Chairs and the UN too. We must thank you and your colleagues for this forthrightness, but at the same time, we regret the equivocation of some politicians when asked about this. Such an approach will encourage the LTTE to fight on, and further endanger civilians. Meanwhile the government tried humanitarian pauses on two occasions, only to find the LTTE taking advantage of this for military operations, for building up walls to further entrap the civilians, and for strewing landmines. This increases our obligation to rescue these hostages, and we will do it, while ensuring minimum civilian casualties. As you know, our operations in April succeeded in getting over 100,000 out, and on Saturday nearly a thousand more came out which unfortunately precipitated brutal LTTE tactics to prevent this recurring. With regard to supplies, we will continue to do our best, and we hope that the ICRC will be able to take in the large ship which we used earlier. Till then there will be small supplies sent in as patients are brought out. Finally, with regard to protection and other rights issues, I should note the insidious campaign of disinformation being carried out. I have discussed this with the Head of UNHCR, and will only refer you to the website of our Mission here. Sri Lanka knows its obligations in this respect, and will ensure that any incident reported to it will be investigated and that abuses if any will not recur. As to releases from the camp, I refer you to the excellent report of Prof Walter Kalin, Special Representative on the Rights of the Displaced, who lays down guiding principles whilst also understanding our security concerns and indicating how these can be respected whilst maximizing a rights based approach. For this, as for the question of rapid resettlement, or movement to other sites, desirable as all this would be in the long term, I would refer you as regards the short term to an article entitled ‘A Miasma of Suspicion’. This is also available on the Mission website, and it suggests why, just as we need to respect the uncertainties of well wishers of Sri Lanka, you too need to respect our own worries. As we are on the verge of defeating terror, we cannot be complacent, given the ruthless effectiveness of the Tigers. We need your support to bring this effort to a successful conclusion, while moving towards a democratic pluralistic future for all our citizens.