

Mannar aerial bombing ignites controversy

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UN terms dead as civilians

Govt. insists target Sea Tiger base

LTTE warns of serious repercussions

By Easwaran Rutnam

The Government yesterday insisted that the Air Force targeted a Sea Tiger base in Mannar, even as the UN termed those dead as "civilians" and the rebels warned of serious repercussions.

Government Defense spokesman Minister Keheliya Rambukwelle, meanwhile, called on the international community to put pressure on the LTTE to create a 'safe haven' for civilians in the war battered North and East, following reports that nearly 14 civilians, including children, were killed in the air raid. While expressing concern over civilian deaths, the UN reiterated the need for both parties to protect civilians and uphold international human rights and humanitarian laws, while calling on both parties to cease hostilities and return to negotiations.

"Sri Lankans continue to suffer deeply due to this conflict, while today's (Tuesday) loss of life is a source of deep concern," said Margareta Wahlström,

United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Acting Emergency Relief Coordinator.

"It is imperative that both sides to the conflict, take all measures to fulfill their obligations under international law, to protect civilians in this conflict; we have too often seen them fall short in this duty."

While refusing to directly respond to the UN statement condemning the death of civilians in Mannar, Minister Rambukwella said that the international community, as well as religious leaders, should realize that the LTTE is capable of misleading them.

"We were prepared to create a safe haven for civilians but the LTTE rejected it outright, without due consideration. If they are concerned about the civilians why refuse? We would like to draw their attention to this," Minister Rambukwelle told the Daily Mirror.

He said that the LTTE may have drawn the civilians to the area which came under aerial attack in Mannar, possibly after receiving a tipoff that it was to come under aerial bombardment, in order to draw international sympathy.

"Where do we draw the line?" the minister queried, noting that if the military continues to act with restraint, in the face of continuing LTTE threats, the consequences could be disastrous, resulting in much higher civilian loss of life.

In an interview with the Associated Press, LTTE peace secretariat head Seevaratnam Puleedevan warned the Sri Lankan Government that it could face "serious repercussions" but declined to elaborate.

"We condemn this brutal attack and we warn the Sri Lanka State of serious repercussions," Puleedevan said by telephone, from insurgent headquarters in northern Kilinochchi. "It will be serious."

The Media Centre for National Security, however, rejected as "false information" spread by the LTTE, on the air strikes and insisted the strike was on a Sea Tiger base in Illuppaikadavai, north of Mannar.

"...there cannot be any civilian casualties in Illuppaikadavai, as the Army earlier, banned civilian settlements in the area," the MCNS said in a statement.

The MCNS further noted that the LTTE's claim that injured civilians were taken to Kilinochchi hospital, as a total lie, since the nearest hospital to Illuppaikadavai are the fully equipped Mannar and Anuradhapura hospitals.

"If there were seriously injured people, the closest hospital they could have been taken to is the Anuradhapura General Hospital. The distance from Illuppaikadavai to the Anuradhapura hospital is around 112 kilometers, while the distance from Illuppaikadavai to Kilinochchi hospital is about 140 kilometers. If there was an airstrike on a civilian settlement, it is astonishing as to why the injured were taken to a hospital far away when there were other hospitals in close proximity," the MCNS said.

"Based on these facts, it is not difficult for anyone to realize that the LTTE is spreading false information that the Air Force had bombed a civilian settlement in Illuppaikadavai," the MCNS added.

"The United Nations once more calls for a cessation of hostilities between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and resumption of the peace process, while recalling the responsibility of all parties to the conflict, to protect civilians and uphold international human rights and humanitarian law," the UN said in a statement.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) also remains concerned about deteriorating livelihoods in the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka -- home to more than 500,000 civilians -- as well as those who have been displaced within the country.

Limited access by land to the peninsula, has impeded the population from receiving sufficient food, medicine and other essential supplies since August 2006. The Government of Sri Lanka has recently committed to improve the supply by sea and local distribution networks.