

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN ASSESSES FLOOD AFFECTED IN SRI LANKA

(New York, 27 December 2007): Today, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) conducted a rapid assessment of the situation of people affected by the recent floods in Batticaloa District in Sri Lanka. Heavy rains starting on the evening of 16 December and continuing up to 24 December 2007 resulted in progressively larger numbers of affected and displaced.

At its peak, the flooding affected over one-quarter of a million people. During the first two days of the rains, the main affected areas were limited to 4 divisions in the central region of Batticaloa District, resulting in the displacement of 375 people. In addition, 474 conflict-affected internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Mavadivembu camp were affected. By 20 December, five additional divisions were experiencing flooding, swelling the numbers of affected to 15,554. Continued heavy rains during the weekend of 23 and 24 December caused a significant increase in the affected area, which spread from the northern tip of Batticaloa District down most of the District's coast line. The population of the affected districts totalled some 250,000, which included more than 40,255 people displaced into 37 welfare centres or schools. Flooding also disrupted road travel and train service during the peak of the flooding. A break in the rains after 24 December resulted in a quick return of the majority of families and by 27 December only 252 individuals remained displaced.

The assessment mission noted that, although most families had returned to their homes, concerns included contaminated wells, loss of household goods and health concerns associated with water-borne diseases and snakes. Longer-term food subsistence was also highlighted as a concern, as many of the affected were no longer able to cultivate land, mainly due to security issues (both related to presence of armed groups and mines). Longer term drainage and irrigation issues were also highlighted.

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights visited the District on 24 and 25 December, where it held discussions with government authorities to assess the situation, including the longer-term problem of irrigation and drainage. The Government will cover the main food needs, but has requested support from Batticaloa-based agencies to address urgent non-food relief items. The Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services allocated 10 million rupees for the Batticaloa district, which is to be divided between the affected divisions. These resources are to cover the provision of hot meals during three days of displacement as well as – to the extent possible - dry rations for affected families.

In addition to the Government-provided food assistance, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) provided 1000 mats and bed sheets and is supporting the local water authorities on the running costs of water bowsers, while the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator has released some \$20,000 from a UNDP Disaster Management project to address the most immediate needs. The Sri Lanka Red Crescent Society and non-governmental organisations are also providing aid.