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Press Conference

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

PRESS CONFERENCE ON EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR'S RECENT MISSION TO SRI LANKA

In the past four days, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had set up 4,500 family-sized tents for internally displaced persons in northern Sri Lanka as part of efforts to ramp up humanitarian aid to tens of thousands of civilians uprooted by intense fighting between Government forces and separatist Tamil rebels, John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, said this afternoon.

He said at a Headquarters press conference that more tents had been airlifted into the conflict zone over the weekend. Food, water and other basic supplies from United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations were en route to help approximately 175,000 civilians — including 110,000 last week alone — who had fled the fighting since January. Many had sought refuge in the Manik Farm camp for internally displaced persons and in transit centres and schools in and around Vavuniya. Another 50,000 people were said to be trapped in the combat zone.

“Although the conditions are very far from satisfactory in that camp and in those transit centres, I think with huge efforts we’re beginning to get a grip on that and the basics will be there to allow people to at least survive,” he said. “We will be able to continue to improve their conditions as we go along.” Vessels of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), carrying 30 tons of food, continued to enter Sri Lanka every two or three days, but a larger ICRC ship with a capacity for 1,000 tons of food had not been able to dock in recent days due to last week’s mass exodus.

Mr. Holmes said he had met with President Mahinda Rajapaksa and key Government ministers in the nation’s capital, Colombo, on Monday to push for a “humanitarian pause” in the fighting and give United Nations and other aid workers sufficient time to unload and distribute essential supplies. However, Sri Lankan officials had rejected that request, claiming that the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would exploit the lull to regroup militarily and continue their armed resistance. The United Nations would continue to press for a pause and full access to the zone for its staff. The Organization called on the Government to exercise restraint in its use of heavy weapons, and on LTTE to release civilians, disarm and surrender.

Asked whether United Nations personnel had been allowed into the screening centres in the camps for the internally displaced, Mr. Holmes said he had visited the main screening point in Omanthai, where UNHCR had a presence, but he had not been allowed to talk to people during the screening process. ICRC had a presence outside the screening point to ensure safe passage to the camps for civilians. The United Nations was pressing Sri Lankan officials for full access so it could assess the situation, as well as allegations of people being pre-screened by the Sri Lankan army prior to arriving at the centres.

As for whether UNHCR had received testimony of such abuses and of summary executions, he said Tamil sources had made such allegations, but not directly to the agency. Family members were often separated upon arrival in the camps, giving rise to claims of disappearances and executions.

Concerning the agreement reached in mid-April between Vijay Nambiar, the Secretary-General’s Chief of Staff, and Sri Lankan officials on establishing a United Nations mission in the combat zone, he said the Government had agreed to the creation of a small technical mission, but it would not allow the minimum humanitarian pause that the Organization deemed essential to ensuring the safety of

its personnel.

On the status of two United Nations staff members detained in the camps, he said the Organization was working to secure their release as soon as possible.

Asked whether evacuations by sea had been discussions, Mr. Holmes said land evacuations were easier, but the United Nations would indeed contemplate removing civilians by sea. The Organization was unaware of any serious attempts by LTTE leaders to escape by sea.

Responding to several questions concerning the absence of official United Nations estimates of the number of casualties, he said there had been several thousand casualties in the last few months, but the lack of credible sources had prevented the Organization from releasing its own official estimates. Since January, journalists and staff had lacked effective access to the combat zone, a situation which hopefully would not set a precedent.

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