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FM TELLS INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

Take punitive action against LTTE

UDITHA KUMARASINGHE and IRANGIKA RANGE

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama told Parliament yesterday the international community should reach a crescendo in calling on the LTTE to lay down arms and allow the people to leave the safe zone, in the absence of which punitive measures would follow.

The Minister speaking at the Emergency debate said, "We welcome the ministerial statement issued earlier this month by the British Foreign Secretary Miliband that the LTTE is a terrorist organisation and that the Government of Sri Lanka has a need to root out the threat from terrorism.

An aspect of this position was also echoed when the European Council in its conclusions on February called on the LTTE to lay down arms and renounce terrorism and violence once and for all, end the inhuman use of child soldiers and forced recruitment and participate in a political process to achieve a lasting solution.

"However, it is regrettable to say that the punitive action on the LTTE by the international community remains largely on paper, where a proscription though in force, its implementation amounts to nothing," he said.

"I wish to assure to the international community that no one is more concerned than the Government about the trapped civilians and using them as human shields in the safe zone.

It has been the LTTE who has continued to fire at civilians who are trying to escape from its clutches firing heavy artillery from the 'no fire zone' and sending suicide bombers to explode themselves in welfare centres."

Despite these terrorist activities, 61,106 civilians have entered welfare centres upto April 2 through safe corridors established by the Government. In addition, the Government has continued to evacuate the sick and injured, together with bystanders, by sea and air. Therefore, the Government throughout the conflict has followed a zero tolerance policy on civilian collateral, he said.

He said the Government has continuously ensured the humanitarian needs of the population from the very inception of this conflict.

The Government has sent 55,000 metric tonnes of food relief items and medicine to the conflict zone by the end of January 9 this year, since mid February up to end of last month, 2,465 metric tonnes of food and essential items and a large stock of essential medical supplies including antibiotics and vaccines have also been dispatched.

We have the international chorus for an urgent humanitarian ceasefire. It is an unrealistic call on the Government considering that over the past 30 years strategically the LTTE has been cleared of the areas which were under their domination.

There have been repeated calls by the President to the LTTE to lay down arms." Bogollagama said the UNHCR as the lead agency for IDPs in a recent report has welcomed the initiatives by the Government in keeping with its objective of providing maximum relief to ensure the well-being of the IDPs without neglecting security.

The APRC process which is aimed at finding a lasting settlement with the involvement of political parties has progressed steadily and it would not be long before the proposals are unveiled.

The President for the fourth time invited the TNA which has representation of the Northern and Eastern Provinces unfortunately as a group they rejected the invitation, through individual TNA MPs have at times differed. Having a solid partnership of the stakeholders from all political parties is imperative to evolve a lasting political settlement, he said.

The Minister said the Cabinet also rejected the appointment of the British Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Sri Lanka as it contravened the basic principles governing international relations and the requirement for consultation and reciprocity.

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