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## International community, LTTE and civilians

*Statement delivered by Foreign Affairs Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, in Parliament on April 7, 2009*



Minister Rohitha Bogollagama,

When the history of Sri Lanka is recorded, Mahinda Rajapaksa's name will be written in golden letters as the Great Unifier of our beloved Motherland. He has achieved this commendable and historic feat that no other leader in our post-independence history has been able to do.

At the outset, I join this august assembly in saluting our valiant military personnel in extricating all the areas in the Vanni from the subjugation of the LTTE, known to the world as a ruthless terrorist organization.

I am certain that all peace loving Sri Lankans will welcome this as signal of freedom. This Group's ruthlessness knows no bounds with its remaining cadres and leaders having holed themselves up in the 12 kilometre no-fire zone created as a safe area for the civilians, thus continuing to secure themselves by a human shield.

As for our military, it has been an arduous trek, inching their way to avoid civilian casualties while losing their own, in their quest to gain control of the land and annihilate terrorism, to create a secure environment imperative for the establishment of democratic institutions required for the pursuit of a sustained political solution.

Today, with the military successes, we are poised on the threshold of defeating terrorism and embarking on an era of lasting peace and security for all our people.

### Creating a strategy

This strategy for the creation of a safe and secure environment has been conducted at times with the demonstration of some understanding by the International Community and at other times pitted against a war of rhetoric - the latter overriding the former at most times.

It was indeed a welcome recognition by the British Government as contained in the Ministerial statement issued earlier this month by Foreign Secretary Miliband, that "the LTTE is a terrorist organization and that the Sri Lankan Government has a need to root out the threat from terrorism".

An aspect of this position was echoed when the European Council in its Conclusions in February 2009 called "on the LTTE to lay down its 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 just and lasting solution".

Undoubtedly this call together with similar sentiments from other quarters of the International Community have hitherto gone unheeded by the LTTE. This only demonstrates the LTTE's apathy and the contempt it has for such positions from the International Community.

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Regrettably however punitive action on the LTTE by the International Community remains largely on paper, where a proscription though in force, its implementation amounts to nothing.

Fund raising by LTTE operatives continue unabated, public demonstrations have now graduated to the blatant use of the terrorist organization's name, insignia and cut outs of the leader are held in the proscribed territories with excuses of how legal action cannot be taken.

I am only left to question the validity of a proscription. While some countries thankfully have been taking action against such activities, there are those who churn out excuses.

For instance, it would not be wrong to expect some uniformity of action in relation to the EU proscription being an integrated entity of member States. However, this has not been the case.

Instead, we have for instance a situation of being censured by the British Government in terms of "the actions of the LTTE not being an excuse for any failings on the part by the Sri Lankan Government to meet the higher standards naturally expected of democratic Governments in a conflict".

I wish to assure the International Community that no one is more concerned than the Government about the civilians trapped and used as human shields, in the safe zone. It is misplaced to be reminded of the responsibility towards our own citizens nor of our international commitments, as it has been the very basis of government strategy in having a secure environment.

All this while, it has been the LTTE which continued to fire at civilians trying to escape from its clutches, shelling heavy artillery out of the "no fire zone", exploding suicide bombs in welfare centres and targeting anti aircraft missiles at a helicopter evacuating civilians.

Despite this, 62,106 civilians have entered welfare centres 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.

The Government has throughout the conflict followed a zero tolerance policy on civilian collateral by observing extreme caution in the conflict area, cognizant of the LTTE's modus operandi on the use of human shields.

#### **Humanitarian needs**

Further, in keeping with the high standards expected from a democratic Government, the Sri Lankan Government has continuously ensured the humanitarian needs of the population from the very inception of this conflict.

The WFP has confirmed adequate food supplies. For the year ending January 2009, 55,000 metric tonnes of food, relief items and medicine had been sent to the conflict zone. Since mid February up to the 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 been dispatched.

As this House is aware, the LTTE regularly siphoned these supplies for their own use, thereby depriving the civilian casualties and subjecting purchases of

same at black market prices.

### Call for ceasefire

Then 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



Ample food relief has been ensured for the conflict-affected. Picture by Rukmal Gamage

strategically the

LTTE has been cleared of the areas which were under their domination. There have been repeated calls by the President, for the LTTE to lay down arms.

If heeded, won't it construe an automatic ceasefire? 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 constant outflow of civilians, against the machinations of the LTTE, only signals their confidence in the conditions outside the area of conflict. Therefore the advocacy for a humanitarian ceasefire is redundant.

Denial of access to the then uncleared areas and welfare villages has also been a bone of contention for the International Community, which is also reflected in the recent British Foreign Secretary's recent statement to the House of Commons.

This position I totally reject. It may be recalled that the UN-Under Secretary General John Holmes, some Colombo based Heads of Missions including those representing the EU countries, EU delegation in Colombo, Brussels based officials from the EC and most recently Dr. Walter Kalin, UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Human Rights for IDPs, all visited these centres.

***To be continued***

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