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EVEN IN THEIR FINAL HOURS:

Tiger brutality continues

Panduka SENANAYAKE

Even in their final hours, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have not mended their brutal ways and are pushing innocent youths to face battle hardened troops after five days of weapons training, according to the Security Forces.

Amidst a major effort by the Security Forces to free the civilians held hostage by the LTTE and an international attempt by terrorist sympathisers to gain a last minute respite for Tiger leader Prabhakaran by taking to the streets in several western capitals, the Tigers have not eased up on their brutality against the civilians under their control.

According to reports reaching the Security Forces, even with defeat staring them in the face, the LTTE, trapped in an eight square kilometre strip of land, continue forcible conscription of youth from among the trapped civilians.

"We have received reports of very young children being forcibly taken from their families and pushed into the LTTE bunkers after five days of weapons training," said a senior military officer. He said "there was a report of a father using a 'manna knife' (machete) to fatally wound an LTTE cadre who came to take away his son. We don't know what happened to the man or his son thereafter," he said.

These innocent youngsters have no chance against the battle hardened soldiers who will charge the enemy lines in the final push and we only hope they are sensible enough to surrender, he said. The Security Forces do not wish to shed innocent blood but neither do they want to become victims of devious terrorist plots, he said.

He said that the Security Forces have air dropped leaflets, requesting the civilians to move into liberated areas from the No Fire Zone (NFZ) and are making regular loudspeaker announcements to the same effect. These announcements are interspersed by appeals from surrendered LTTE cadres as well as civilians who have managed to escape the LTTE.

These announcements made from different locations around the NFZ also indicate places where civilians who have evaded the LTTE could cross over to safety, the officer said. Up to now over 62,000 civilians have managed to cross over to safety.

Meanwhile, UN Under Secretary General Sir John Holmes, writing in the London Guardian newspaper following a recent visit to Sri Lanka said that although the LTTE leadership says that the Tamil civilians accompanied them into the war zone voluntarily and they do not want to leave, there are continuing reports of shooting at fleeing civilians, destroying boats to prevent them leaving and forcing them to fight against their will by the LTTE.

He said it is clear that the LTTE is refusing to let people flee, though many are managing to escape somehow. He added: 'I fear the combatants may be gearing up for a final confrontation and called it a very grave situation.'

The Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations said, the LTTE's leadership claims the civilians in the conflict zone do not want to leave because they accompanied the LTTE voluntarily in the first place and are afraid of government reprisals. Yet there are continuing reports that the group's fighters are shooting at fleeing civilians, Holmes further added, civilians trapped by the fighting must be allowed a free choice of whether to leave or stay, as we have made clear

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to the LTTE. If the LTTE truly has the best interests of the Tamil people at heart, they should contribute to ending this unnecessary civilian suffering.

There have been many hundreds of civilian deaths caused by firing from both sides, though exact numbers and who fired what and when are impossible to verify, he said.

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