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## Holmes and the like blind to the truth

Ranil WIJAYAPALA

As the 48-hour humanitarian pause declared by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in view of the Sinhala Tamil New Year came to an end on April 14 mid night, amid LTTE launching a vigorous campaign to stop civilians moving out of the No Fire Zone, an extensive debate is now on as to who is responsible for the plight of the civilians trapped in the small pocket in the Mullaitivu coast.



Trapped civilians, who had escaped from the clutches of the LTTE to the safety of the Security Forces, vent their joy

Many were of the opinion that the LTTE did not reciprocate to the 48 hours humanitarian pause declared by the President, as they did not allow the civilians to move out of the Safe Zone. They blamed the LTTE for preventing civilians moving out of the Safe Zone freely. The British and French foreign ministers have in a joint statement urged the LTTE to lay down arms and to free the civilians from hostage whilst deploring the LTTE attempt to use the civilians as a shield.

Meanwhile, UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes, briefing the media about the current Sri Lankan situation on April 15, after the Government declared 48 hours humanitarian pause came to an end, said that it was inadequate for the civilians to move out.

During that press conference Holmes also blamed the LTTE for not letting the civilians out of the Safe Zone whilst urging the Security Forces not to use heavy weapons to direct fire into the No Fire Zone.

He indirectly indicated that the Security Forces were responsible for the dozens of people being killed inside the Safe Zone due to use of heavy weapons by the Security Forces. But he failed to give verified figures about the civilian casualties and deaths inside the No Fire Zone, apparently giving the same picture given by the LTTE to the international community.

### Correct picture

Therefore, it is obvious that although Holmes is pointing a finger at the Security Forces for civilian deaths, he had not got the correct picture about the Sri Lankan situation or else he has forgotten the fact that the LTTE cadres too are operating inside the same Safe Zone and continue their fight with the Security Forces keeping the civilians as a shield.

The Security Forces have given an assurance that they were not using artillery and mortar against the Tiger cadres directing fire at the Security Forces taking the cover of the Safe Zone. At the same time, they have not understood that the Security Forces are yet to reach the boundaries of the No Fire Zone along the Paranthan-Mullaitivu A-35 Road and also from the Northern direction of No Fire Zone.

Except for the 58 Division which has already finished its task of reaching the boundaries of the No Fire Zone, the 53 and 55 Divisions are yet to reach the Northern and Western boundaries of the No Fire Zone.

The 53 Division, which is operating from the East of Puthukudiyiruppu along the A-35 road, had to advance towards the borders of the No Fire Zone overcoming huge earth bunds and trenches created by the LTTE to stop their advance whilst facing heavy resistance from the LTTE using their heavy artillery and mortar.

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Troops of the 53 Division, which managed to capture huge earth bund cum trench line East of Puthukudiyiruppu and in the Northern edge of the Nanthikadal lagoon, suffered considerable number of casualties as they have been given strict instructions not to use heavy weapons to neutralize LTTE artillery and mortars directed from the No Fire Zone.

What has not been observed by John Holmes is that the Tiger cadres getting killed and injured during these confrontations too are inside the No Fire Zone, and the fact that Tiger cadres are not wearing uniforms in the battlefield.

The Security Forces, through intercepted LTTE radio communications, get confirmation that dozens of Tiger cadres are being killed in the battlefield on daily basis. The question here is to which account, the LTTE is adding these figures and that has to be answered by those who are holding Security Forces responsible for these unacceptable amount of civilian deaths.



Civilians, who had escaped from the LTTE grip in the No Fire Zone, about to be transported by the Security Forces

On the other hand, the UN agencies also accept the fact that LTTE is preventing civilians coming out of the Safe Zone. They have get confirmation from relief workers that the majority of the population trapped inside is desperate to leave the area, but that they are being prevented by the LTTE.

Thousands of civilians fleeing the Safe Zone also narrate their agonizing experiences with the LTTE in their bid to flee from the Tiger grip and how they lost their children and loved ones on their way to Security Forces controlled areas due to LTTE fire. The fact that has to be highlighted is that the civilians are taking huge risks to flee from the Tiger grip even ignoring the guns pointed at them and take refuge with the Security Forces. Therefore, it is clear that they have kept faith in the Security Forces than the LTTE and that they feel safe with the Security Forces than the LTTE. There is a big question before those who are making a huge cry about civilians' deaths inside the Safe Zone. They must inquire and investigate how LTTE is keeping civilians forcibly inside the Safe Zone. They must not forget the fact that LTTE is a terror outfit and is the most ruthless terror outfit in the world which has no respect to humanity. Their terror machines are merciless even towards their own community and can spearhead any blood bath inside the Safe Zone to keep those civilians under their detention.

#### LTTE cruelty

The 26 year long history of the LTTE gives ample proof of their cruelty against the Sinhalese community and also towards their own Tamil community who went against their wishes. Therefore, those who are trying to hold the Security Forces responsible for these unverified number of civilian deaths inside No Fire Zone, should realize the fact that they are taking the side of a terror outfit which if not being eradicated, would be a big menace to the international community in time to come.

They also ignore the fact that they too are going against a legitimate government which is making a genuine effort to get rid of a terror outfit, not only on behalf of the Sri Lankan community, but also on behalf of the entire international community.

So it is incumbent as to whom they should believe in at this juncture. Whether it is the terror outfit which is making desperate attempts to come out of the grave situation hoodwinking the international community or the democratic government which has proved its bona fides to the international community.

It was under this background that UN Secretary General Ban-Ki-Moon dispatched his Chief of Staff Vijay Nambiar to Sri Lanka for urgent talks with the Sri Lankan Government.

Nambiar met Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa at the Defence Ministry on Thursday to discuss the situation after the 48-hour humanitarian pause came to an end.

He had also reportedly had a close door meeting with President Rajapaksa on Friday. But there was no official intimation about the meeting Nambiar had with the President.

According to sources, Nambiar had requested the Government to extend the period of humanitarian pause to facilitate the civilians to move out of the Safe Zone. However, the Government declined as the LTTE had not allowed the civilians to move out of the Safe Zone.

Therefore, the Security Forces are now continuing their military operations to reach the boundaries of the No Fire Zone with the objective of rescuing the trapped civilians.

#### **Last by-road**

The 53 Division, under the command of Major General Kamal Gunaratne, continued their march along the A-35 road capturing the last by-road connecting to the A-35 road from the No Fire Zone. The Air Mobile Brigade under the command of Colonel Thilak Hangilipola commanded the 5 Gemunu Watch and 1 Gemunu Watch battalions to capture massive earth bund created by the LTTE on April 12.

The LTTE has created a massive mine field in this terrain to stop the advancement of the troops into the No Fire Zone along the A-35 road as troops have recovered 1,400 AP mines in less than 200 meters stretch on the earth bund facing the advancing troops. This very clearly indicates that the LTTE is still engaged in a process to delay the advancement of the Security Forces into the No Fire Zone.

#### **Boundaries**

Despite huge mine fields laid by the LTTE to stop the Security Forces or to delay their advancement until they get a favourable situation internationally, the 53 Division continued advancing on daily basis after the humanitarian pause to reach the boundaries of the No Fire Zone in Valaimadam and Vellamullavaikkal.

Meanwhile, the 58 Division, which has already reached the boundaries of the No Fire Zone from the western edge of No Fire Zone in Ampalavanpokkanai, also continued their limited operations outside the No Fire Zone.

As these military manouvers continued towards the No Fire Zone, Udaya Perera, Director Operations of the Sri Lanka Army flew to Malaysia yesterday morning to take his new posting as the Sri Lanka Deputy High Commissioner to Malaysia. He was promoted to the rank of Major General prior to his appointment as the Deputy High Commissioner.

Major General Udaya Perera will be the first serving Army officer to hold a diplomatic position as High Commissioner. However, this senior Gajaba officer's appointment comes at a time Malaysian authorities have launch massive operation to crack down on terror operatives based in Malaysia.

#### **Festive season**

With Major General Udaya Perera's overseas appointment, Colonel Aruna Wanniararchchi, the Deputy General Officer Commanding of the 57 Division has been appointed as the Director Operations of the Army.

Colonel Mahinda Weerasuriya, who was the 533 Brigade Commander, has been appointed Deputy GOC of the 57 Division and Colonel Jayantha Gunaratne as the 533 Brigade Commander.

During the festive season with the declaration of the humanitarian pause by the President, the Security Forces concentrated on celebrating Avurudu in Puthukudiyiruppu and Chalai areas.

Aluth Avurudu traditions were followed at 58 Division under the command of Brigadier Shavendra Silva in Puthukudiyiruppu for the first time with the participation of officers and other rankers. The civilians, who crossed into Government controlled areas on New Year day, too were given refreshments and participated in New Year games at a location in Puthukudiyiruppu, refreshing their minds after their escape from the Tiger grip.

The 55 Division, under the command of Brigadier Prasanna Silva too organised New Year celebrations in Chalai and Chundikulam for Security Forces personnel who were engaged in offensive operations in Chalai area.

However, the biggest Aluth Avurudu surprise came on Thursday.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa made a surprise visit to Kilinochchi, the fallen de-facto capital of the LTTE along with Presidential Secretary Lalith Weerathunga, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, three Forces Commanders and the Inspector General of Police.

It was also the first occasion Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka visited Kilinochchi after it was captured by the 57 and 58 Divisions although he had made numerous visits to Security Forces headquarters in Vanni. The President's visit to Kilinochchi boosted the morale of the Security Forces who were engaged in offensive operations as it was the first time a head of State visited this town in the last 60 years.

It was the second such visit by the President to the battlefield, the first being to Vakarai and Sampur when he offered his gratitude to the troops who made their first victorious march into the Eastern theatre.

The visit of the President to Kilinochchi, drew big media coverage, both locally and internationally as he visited the heart of the supposed Tamil Eelam which was captured by the Security Forces on January 02, 2009.

The prime movers behind the Kilinochchi operation General Officer Commanding the 57 Division Major General Jagath Dias and the 58 Division General Officer Commanding Brigadier Shavendra Silva briefed the President about the achievements they made during their operations.

#### **President visits**

President Rajapaksa was keen to observe what was happening inside the Safe Zone and the steps taken by the military to move into that area. The President freely moved with the soldiers and officers and even shared jokes with the soldiers whilst enjoying 'Kevun' and 'Kiribath' with them at the Kilinochchi Hospital premises.

The most memorable part of his visit was the inspection of the LTTE buildings captured by the Security Forces and his visit to Operations Room of the 58 Division where he observed the activities of the No Fire Zone through the images of the UAV.

That must be the first occasion any Head of State visited an operations room during the 26-year long conflict in Sri Lanka.

It very clearly demonstrates the brave leadership given by the President to the three Forces as the Commander-in-Chief and his commitment to look after the troops who had dedicated themselves towards eradicating terrorism from the Sri Lankan soil.

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