

# The Guardian

## Miliband urges Sri Lanka to call truce with Tamil Tigers

Foreign secretary demands protection for civilians trapped as government troops close net on rebel fighters



Civilians at a refugee camp near Vavuniya, in northern Sri Lanka, after fleeing the Tiger-held area. Photograph: Reuters

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Wed 29 Apr 2009 05.41 EDT

The foreign secretary, David Miliband today called on the Sri Lankan government to declare an immediate ceasefire and give civilians trapped in the country's war zone a chance to escape.

"Now is the time for the fighting to stop," Miliband told reporters on a one-day visit to the country. "Protection of civilians is absolutely paramount in our minds."

Miliband and his French counterpart, Bernard Kouchner, were due to meet Sri Lankan officials for talks, amid growing concern over civilian casualties.

Miliband and Kouchner, who are representing the European Union, also called on the government to allow aid workers access to the war zone, but Kouchner said the government had denied their request.

Tens of thousands of people remain caught inside the tiny coastal strip where government troops have encircled the remaining forces of the the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Although the government says no more than 20,000 civilians remain inside the zone, UN officials suggested the true figure could be as high as 150,000.

Later today, the politicians are expected to tour displacement camps, which have been swamped in recent days by more than 100,000 war refugees.

The international development minister, Mike Foster, visited Sri Lanka on Monday after Gordon Brown promised an extra £2.5m for humanitarian aid to help people displaced by the fighting in the country.

The prime minister spoke to the Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, over the weekend to raise concerns over the plight of civilians caught up in the violence, while reiterating calls for an end to the fighting.

The Tamil Tigers, who have been fighting for an independent homeland for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority since 1983, announced a ceasefire on Sunday, but the government rejected the move as a "gimmick".

The visit by the European diplomats came amid accusations that government forces had fired artillery barrages into the northern war zone, despite having promised on Monday to stop using heavy weapons because of the risk of civilian casualties.

A military spokesman, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara, denied the accusation, saying troops were using only small arms in the battle.

However, the website TamilNet reported that more than 5,000 artillery, mortar- and multi-barrel rocket launcher shells had hit the war zone between Monday evening and yesterday morning, killing scores of civilians.

About a dozen shells hit a makeshift hospital inside rebel territory, killing five patients and sending many others fleeing for their lives, said Dr Thangamuttu Sathyamurthi, a government official working in the war zone. Other civilians in the area had also been killed, he said.

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