

INTERNATIONAL  
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## **A slaughter waiting to happen**

**By Lakhdar Brahimi**

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The already severe humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka is on the brink of catastrophe. It will take the quick arrival of humanitarian relief and high-level international political muscle to bring the nightmarish situation to an end and prevent a slaughter.

An estimated 150,000 civilians are now trapped in a tiny pocket of land between Sri Lankan military forces, whose artillery shells regularly fall among them, and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who shoot at them if they try to escape. Food, clean water and medical assistance are all increasingly scarce.

According to U.N. figures, 2,300 civilians have already died and at least 6,500 have been injured since January. Some 500 children have been killed and over 1,400 injured. What happens to the rest of those caught in the middle of the government's onslaught and the Tigers' fight to the death depends not only on the two parties but on the international response as well.

The crisis is born of acts by both sides that most probably amount to serious violations of humanitarian law and perhaps to war crimes or crimes against humanity.

As it has withdrawn before the government forces, the LTTE has sought refuge in the civilian population. It has been holding men, women and children as hostages, forcibly recruiting them and using them as human shields.

The government has responded with attacks that independent observers describe as indiscriminate. Distinguishing combatants from noncombatants has become impossible with fighters and civilians packed so closely together. Alarming reports are coming in that government forces are shelling even those areas they themselves have declared "no-fire zones."

If both groups do not end the fighting immediately, the lives of tens of thousands of civilians are at risk. Both parties must understand that the continuation of their current actions is not acceptable.

The situation is even more tragic because it represents an unnecessarily devastating coda to a war that is already over.

Totally overwhelmed by government forces, the LTTE has lost. Holding civilian hostages and showing complete disregard for the Tamil population that it claims to want to liberate will not resurrect its ability to fight this war.

Nor will the annihilation of thousands of civilians secure the government's long-cherished victory over terrorism. On the contrary, the indiscriminate killing of its own citizens will make it harder for Colombo to seal its military victory with post-conflict reconciliation and development of the Tamil-majority north.

Opinion among the millions of Tamils around the world, especially those in southern India, is being dangerously radicalized by images and stories of intense civilian suffering.

The international community should not let the already desperate situation end up an all-out humanitarian catastrophe. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon should insist on immediate access for U.N. staff to no-fire zones in order to assess the needs of the population. He should appoint a special representative to work with the government of Sri Lanka and all the relevant parties to guarantee the rights and protection of the endangered civilians.

On the political side, other international leaders — in particular, President Barack Obama, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other leaders from Asia, the nonaligned movement and the Commonwealth — must urgently use their leverage to convince the Sri Lankan government to stop its offensive.

They should help shift the government from a strategy of total annihilation to one of containment by addressing government fears that LTTE leaders will use a pause in the fighting to flee and regroup.

In addition to assisting the U.N. in the evacuation of civilians, all these friends of Sri Lanka should commit themselves to supervise the surrender of the LTTE, with guarantees of the physical security of those who surrender, backed up by the presence of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees wherever the military receives civilians or surrendered fighters.

The United States and India could also offer to increase naval surveillance in order to prevent remaining Tiger fighters from escaping by sea.

None of these measures will be easy to achieve. The government and the LTTE are locked in a war to the last man and seem oblivious to the civilian death toll around them.

The international community has the means to act; it must not, it cannot fail to act. Being a spectator when 150,000 thousand people are trapped in a death zone is not an option.

*Lakhdar Brahimi, former special adviser to the U.N. secretary general, is a board member of the International Crisis Group.*

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