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March 14, 2009

## U.N. Rights Official Fears War Crimes in Sri Lanka

By [SETH MYDANS](#)

COLOMBO, [Sri Lanka](#) — Government forces and Tamil rebels may be committing war crimes against civilians trapped in a conflict zone and should suspend their fighting to allow them to escape, the [United Nations](#) high commissioner for human rights said Friday.

The military, in what it says is a final assault in a 25-year separatist war, has cornered the remnants of the insurgency on a sliver of land that is packed with civilians — as many as 180,000, according to the United Nations official, Navi Pillay.

In a [statement](#) issued in Geneva, Ms. Pillay said the government had repeatedly shelled the area, which it had designated a “no fire” zone for civilians. At the same time, she said, the rebels, known as the [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam](#), or L.T.T.E., were using the civilians as human shields and had reportedly shot some as they tried to flee.

“Certain actions being undertaken by the Sri Lankan military and by the L.T.T.E. may constitute violations of international human rights and humanitarian law,” Ms. Pillay said.

“The world today is ever sensitive about such acts that could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity,” she added.

The government strongly denies that it has shelled civilian areas, and it puts the number of people in the combat zone at 70,000, lower than most independent estimates.

“We have very clearly stated that we have not at any time fired at the no fire zone,” said Mahinda Samarasinghe, the minister for disaster management and human rights, speaking to The Associated Press.

Independent reporters and most humanitarian groups have been barred from the battle zone, and reports from the area are difficult to verify.

In addition to barring civilians from leaving the area, the rebels are also reported to be recruiting civilians, including children, as soldiers, Ms. Pillay’s office said in the statement.

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U.N. Rights Official Fears War Crimes ...

“The brutal and inhuman treatment of civilians by the L.T.T.E. is utterly reprehensible, and should be examined to see if it constitutes war crimes,” she said.

Citing “a range of credible sources,” Ms. Pillay said more than 2,800 civilians had been killed and more than 7,000 had been wounded, including hundreds of children, since Jan. 20. She said 150,000 to 180,000 civilians remained trapped by the fighting, which is in northeastern Sri Lanka.

The Tamil rebels have been fighting since 1983 for a separate homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. The Hindu Tamils are a minority in the mostly Buddhist Sinhalese nation. Their insurgency has been particularly brutal, marked by suicide bombings and attacks on civilians.

“The current level of civilian casualties is truly shocking,” Ms. Pillay said, “and there are legitimate fears that the loss of life may reach catastrophic levels, if the fighting continues in this way.”

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