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Committed to Human Rights and Community
Development

PRESS RELEASE

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Tamil people's endless tragedy under news blockade

As the war in Sri Lanka shows no sign of abating, the fighting in Jaffna has resulted in more suffering for the civilians of the north who have endured years of displacement and threatens to bring about a humanitarian crisis. Communications and transport to the Jaffna peninsula are totally disrupted and supplies of food and other essentials have been cut off. More than 50,000 people are displaced in Maruthankerni, Thenmaratchy and Palai areas and 20,000 are said to be accommodated in refugee camps established by the Government Agent and provided dry rations. These camps are in Point Pedro in northeastern Vadamaratchy and Chankanai, Kokkuvil, Manipay and Thirunelveli in western Valikamam. Over 5,000 people are housed in St Patrick's College and another 5,000 in Jaffna Hindu College. House owners/occupants in Manipay and Chankanai have been urged to house displaced families from the town. Earlier, the Army refused to allow around 5,000 people in Palai to move to safer western areas of the peninsula, clearly intending to use them as prey or pawns as the LTTE forces advanced. Following pressure from international agencies, they were allowed to leave, except the people in Soranpatru and Dharmapuri which had been declared high security areas.

Around 70% of the civilians in Jaffna town had moved out following a request by the LTTE. Most of them have taken refuge with friends or relatives in Valikmam. Cargo and passenger shipping between Jaffna and southern areas has been suspended. The ICRC ship that arrived in Point Pedro on 31 May removed hospital patients to the south for further treatment. Following the LTTE attack on naval vessels, it is unlikely that any ship service will be allowed to continue. Currently more than 4,000 people are stuck in Trincomalee awaiting, ship service to travel to Jaffna.

Even before the fighting began sufficient food was not reaching Jaffna, as a result of government restrictions and lack of regular shipping. Government restrictions have also adversely affected agricultural production and furthermore, landmines are preventing farmers cultivating their fields. Currently there is only a three-month food stock in the Jaffna peninsula. In these circumstances, if the fighting continues for more than three months, there are fears that a humanitarian crisis will consume Jaffna.

In the Vanni, there is an acute shortage of medicines. Medicines for the first quarter of 2000 were

allowed only in early May. But all medicines, particularly painkillers, anti-biotics and wound dressing, were drastically cut. The Defence Ministry has ordered the reduction, alleging that LTTE cadre wounded in the fighting in Jaffna are being treated in the Vanni. Only one-third of the food and medicines needed have been allowed into the Vanni for many years. The tactic of the government is to send enough food to keep the people alive and to ensure that there is no widespread malnutrition. Military and political objectives are allowed to override humanitarian concerns, though not to the point of creating a mass emergency, which would generate international pressure.

The lack of medicines and medical equipment has resulted in many deaths. MSF said in November 1999 that there are increasing health risks to the civilian population in the Vanni because of the shortage of medical supplies, food and shelter. In November, the mortality rate among the 710 patients admitted to Mallavi hospital was 4%, while the rate for children under 12 years was 6.5%. Some 150 people were admitted to the surgical ward, but only 46 major operations were carried out because of lack of medical supplies.

Malaria is causing concern in the Vanni and the difficulties in carrying out preventive measures as a result of government restrictions are making the situation worse. During 1997 and 1998, 53% of the 430,240 malaria patients in Sri Lanka were from Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi Districts. But 80% of the 177 deaths due to malaria were in these districts. In 1999, 216,000 people were treated in Kilinochchi hospital, 31,600 for malaria, and 186 people died, including 17 children. In Mallavi hospital, 158,000 people were treated, including for malaria, septicaemia and diarrhoea in 1999, and 142 people died. Of the 299 children born in the hospital in 1999, 166 were underweight. According to Norwegian agency Redd Barna, undernutrition among children in Sri Lanka is 37%, but in the Vanni it is as high as 67%.

The government has restricted many essential items into the Vanni. Restrictions on fuel, fertilisers, agricultural implements, spare parts for vehicle and machinery have badly affected agriculture. Fishing is heavily restricted, driving most fishing families to extreme poverty. Restrictions on schoolbooks, pens, school furniture and educational material have an adverse impact on education. NGOs working in the northeast Tamil homeland say that permits for water pumps, building material, hospital equipment, shelter material and ambulances are either denied or delayed for many months by the Defence Ministry. Even after the Ministry grants permits, local military commands often impose their own restrictions. These restrictions also apply to LTTE controlled areas in the East. In Vavuniya, there are currently more than 22,000 Tamil refugees in 12 camps. Health and sanitary conditions in the camps are extremely poor. The security forces have refused permission for many people in the camps to travel to southern areas.

On 16 May 2000, MSF said that the security forces severely restricted medical supplies, since March 2000, and called on the Sri Lankan government to permit adequate medical supplies into northern areas held by the LTTE to allow emergency civilian treatment. MSF says that in the first two weeks of May more than 40 patients had to be transferred or discharged without adequate surgical treatment and more than 3,700 out-patients were sent home without medication.

All the restrictions are having their impact on the population physically and mentally and children are most affected. The war and human rights violations have caused widespread psychological disorders and facilities for treatment are extremely limited. People fear that these will have a long term effect on the entire population of the northeast.

Threats on journalists and human rights workers are on the increase. The government's introduction of new Emergency Regulations on 3 May declaring that the country is in a state of war was subjected to widespread criticism by the international community as it violates many fundamental rights, provides for wide powers for security forces, weakening legal remedies. The government has also taken measures to divert funds earmarked for development work to the war effort. The censorship of the war news has led to rumors and confusion.

A Number of Tamil civilians have been killed in Army shelling and Airforce bombing in Jaffna and the Vanni. At least 50 people are reported killed and over 100 injured. Airforce bombers attacked Pallikudah near Pooneryan on 12 May killing five members of one family, including two children. Eleven others, including three children were seriously wounded. Shells killed five people and injured six at Columbuthurai on 15 May.

Although the LTTE has offered a cease-fire in May, the Sri Lankan government has refused to accept the offer. The LTTE on 9 June is said to have urged the resident representatives of the UNHCR and the ICRC to help to arrange a temporary cessation of hostilities in the thenmarachchi division of the Jaffna peninsula to facilitate the evacuation of civilians caught up in the war zone. Jaffna Bishop Rev Thomas Savundaranayagam has criticized the government for placing the country on "war footing" and warns that such a step would only create mass destruction and huge losses instead of bringing about a peaceful solution.

The Sri Lankan government has on numerous counts, violated most of the principles on Internal Displacement. The Tamil Information Centre (TIC) wishes to draw attention to Prof. Jordan J Paust who in his essay in the Vanderbilt Journal of *Transitional law*, May 1998, states that "internal withholding of medicine and medical supplies from the LTTE controlled areas, as recognised by the US State Department, is clear violation of Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Convention and a war crime. Medicine and medical supplies are neutral and protected property in time of armed conflict and may not be withheld.

The Tamil Information Centre appeals to the Sub-Commission and the Special Representative on Internally Displaced People to call upon the government of Sri Lanka to remove all existing impediments that cause severe hardship and suffering to displaced persons and other civilians who are trapped in the conflict areas.

The TIC also further appeals to the Sub-Commission to request the Special Representative on Internally Displaced People to make another visit to Sri Lanka to ascertain the plight of the one million internal refugees in the light of escalating violence in the northeast.

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