



SRI LANKA

War on the Displaced

Sri Lankan Army and LTTE Abuses against
Civilians in the Vanni

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After 25 years, the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) may be nearing its conclusion. But for the quarter of a million civilians trapped or displaced by the fighting, the tragedy has intensified.

Since early January 2009, civilian casualties in the northern Vanni region have skyrocketed while food supplies and medical care have dwindled.

War on the Displaced, based on a Human Rights Watch fact-finding mission to northern Sri Lanka in February 2009, details government and LTTE abuses responsible for much of the civilian suffering.

While in retreat, the LTTE has forcibly taken along all civilians under its control. As the territory defended by the LTTE has decreased—now a short narrow strip on the northeast coast of the island—the civilian population has been dangerously forced into an increasingly smaller space. The LTTE has refused to allow civilians to flee the fighting, and has repeatedly fired on those who have sought to make their way to government-held territory. Many of those who remain under LTTE control, including children, are subjected to forced recruitment and often deadly forced labor on the battlefield.

Sri Lankan forces have repeatedly and indiscriminately fired artillery at areas packed with civilians. This includes numerous reported bombardments of a government declared “safe zone” and of remaining hospitals in the region. The plight of the region’s civilians has been exacerbated by the government’s decision in September 2008 to order most humanitarian agencies out of the Vanni.

Displaced persons who escape the LTTE to government-controlled areas are being held in government “welfare villages” or in hospitals lacking basic supplies. The military-controlled barbed-wire camps deny those sent there, including entire families, their liberty and freedom of movement.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to act immediately to stop the slaughter of civilians. Both parties should agree to a humanitarian corridor and otherwise respect the laws of war.

An injured woman is rushed away after an artillery attack in front of Tharmapuram Hospital. January 8, 2009.

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