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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATIONS THAT REQUIRE THE COUNCIL'S ATTENTION

**Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples,
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 May 2009]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Plight of the civilian population in Sri Lanka's civil war

Since April 20th when the army burst a mud embankment built by the LTTE at Putumattalan more than 100,000 civilians fled the fighting zone. Since January an estimated 190,000 people have fled. According to the UN some 50,000 civilians of which most are Tamils remain trapped in the rebel territory and a "no fire zone" in Sri Lanka's northeast. The area of fighting between the government and the LTTE, a tiny coastal strip now consists of 7 square kilometers. Though before the government had declared the zone of Mullaitivu district a "no fire-zone", over the past weekend the Sri Lankan military allegedly used intense shelling and air strikes against the LTTE rebels. The ongoing indiscriminate shelling of densely populated areas, including hospitals, violates the laws of war. Medical sources are saying that as many as 1,000 ethnic Tamil civilians were killed, including 106 children. On Tuesday, May 12, a mortar shell struck the last functioning medical facility in the fighting zone. According to a health worker 47 patients and bystanders were killed and more than 50 others wounded. Up to 50 people were killed Wednesday when the field hospital was shelled. There are allegations that at least 30 permanent and makeshift hospitals in the combat zone were attacked. Independent confirmation of the numbers is impossible since for weeks the fighting zone has been isolated by the army. Most of northern Sri Lanka is off limits to foreigners.

Serious press freedom violations continue: Three foreign journalists from the British *Channel 4* were briefly detained in Trincomalee and then expelled from Sri Lankan authorities. Their journalist visas were cancelled and they are banned from visits to Sri Lanka. They had produced a broadcast that showed the terrible living conditions for civilians in the displacement camps. At the end of April the 32 internment camps run by the government held more than 200,000 civilians, which was three times the number of only 10 days before that. Thousands in the camps are without access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities. As a result the danger of waterborne diseases is hugely increased. 30 per cent of the displaced are children; they are in increased risk from ring worms, chicken pox and diarrhea because of dehydration and contaminated water supplies.

Foreigners working in the restricted area report an urgent need of staff members, especially nurses. Aid agencies say that getting visas and security clearance for their staff is very difficult. There are reports that at least 30 people died of starvation; they belonged to a group of people who escaped the fighting zone to camps run by the government for the displaced.

The LTTE violated the laws of war by using civilians as human shields, violently preventing civilians from fleeing the combat zone, deliberately deploying their forces to densely populated civilian areas. The LTTE continues to recruit young children with force.

There is an increasing number of Sri Lankans trying to reach Indian shores with boats. These refugees did not want to be quarantined in a Sri-Lankan-government-controlled camp. Many of them die due to a lack of food and only saltwater to drink. Refugees who made it to India's Andhra Pradesh to a human rights organization that the Sri Lankan government forces still use heavy weapons in the so called "no-fire-zone" in Mullaitivu district. The government in Colombo still claims that it stopped using heavy weapons in the fighting zone three weeks ago.

The 26-year old civil war has killed over 100,000 people and injured thousands more. Many communities were uprooted from their homes and forced to take refuge in areas such as Vavunia, Jaffna and Trincomalee that more densely populated and not able to cope with the thousands of people who are internally displaced. Since the beginning of 2009 up to the end of last, week more than 6,500 civilians were killed and another 14,000 wounded, according to a UN document.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to:

- urge the Sri Lankan government to stop the offensive and let relief supplies into the fighting zone during a humanitarian pause monitored by the UN,
- urge the Sri Lankan government to stop using heavy weapons in the so-called “no-fire-zone” in case the government does not stop its offensive,
- urge the LTTE to allow civilians to leave the fighting zone, stop executing or maiming those who flee and stop forced recruitment,
- urge Sri Lanka’s donors of development aid to put pressure on the government in Colombo in order to stop its offensive.
