

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
WORKING GROUP
XXTH MEETING
29 November 1995 UNDP, New York

SRI LANKA

I. BACKGROUND

1. The armed conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government, dating back to 1983, ignited again in April 1995 after a brief cessation of hostilities in January 1995, and intensified on 17 October, following major Government offensive with the declared aim of capturing Jaffna, the stronghold of the LTTE, and defeating the LTTE militarily. At present, the Sri Lankan Army is reported to have entered the city of Jaffna.
2. The Government is willing to negotiate with the LTTE on certain conditions, and will be prepared to undertake a major rehabilitation and reconstruction programme after a settlement.
3. During the history of this conflict, several hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced temporarily, or for longer periods. At present, *according to the best available estimates*, there seem to be only a very small number of civilians left in and around Jaffna, while possibly about 350,000 IDPs are in Chavakachcheri, Thanmaradchy and Vagamarachy divisions, and some 120,000 have recently gone to districts in the Wannu region. As more people are moved across the lagoon by the LTTE (5,000 or more daily), the number of IDPs in Chavakachcheri will diminish and the number in the Wannu region will increase.

II. HUMANITARIAN ISSUES AND POSSIBLE FUTURE TRENDS

a. Humanitarian access

- (i) The principal concern of humanitarian organisations has been the difficulty in getting permission from the Government to move humanitarian goods and personnel to the IDP areas. From 15 November all permits to transport relief supplies to the North have to be agreed to by a newly-designated Government focal point, as well as by the Ministry of Defense.

- (ii) While the situation seems to have improved in the last week with the Government making an effort to assist in the North by increasing its level of food supplies and by making it easier for non-food items such as shelter materials to go to the North, requests for permits for non-food relief items such as soap, have been pending for two weeks, and it is still reluctant to allow medical personnel into the conflict area.

b. Coordination

(i) The second most difficult issue has been coordination between the Government, various agencies and NGOs, and the incomplete information about actual needs and available supplies.

(ii) The UN agencies represented in Sri Lanka have established a UN Emergency Task Force, consisting of representatives of UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP and WFP, and chaired by the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator, which is meeting regularly and has a well coordinated approach.

(iii) The Government focal point, while important for facilitating relief supplies, has not yet been able to coordinate the overall efforts. Neither did the Government activate the joint planning mechanism designed at a workshop just prior to the outbreak of the emergency.

(iv) Meetings between various humanitarian actors were held and good will expressed by all, but time has been lost due to the lack of a clear mechanism. The Government has finally called the first tri-partite Government-UN-NGO meeting for 29 November.

c. Financial Issues

(i) On the whole, funding for the first stage response has not been a constraint for most organisations. The NGOs seem to have funds available. UNHCR and UNICEF, the two principal UN agencies active in the North, were able to reallocate funding from the German Government. ICRC has picked up a number of large grants from the British, Australian, Canadian and German Governments, and the UK and Swiss Governments have further grants to ICRC. A large-scale and extended response to a long-term emergency might, however, be more difficult. Both UNICEF and at least one NGO (CARE) are known to be seeking funding.

d. Technical Issues

- (i) To date, no complex technical issues have arisen. There have been questions about the extent of chlorination of water that would be necessary under certain conditions, but information was obtained. No capacity to make a positive identification of cholera exists in the conflict area, but arrangements have been made to bring samples to Colombo for testing.

e. Political considerations

(i) This conflict has a deep political dimension, which permeates its humanitarian aspect as well. In spite of the de facto LTTE control over the population in the Northern Province, the Government has always regarded them as any other citizens, maintaining a basic government structure, services and the supply of food, including free distribution of basic food to IDPs. During hostilities, however, economic sanctions against these areas ban all items that the Government believes may be used for military purposes, including all metal items, cement, batteries, fertilizer, and severely restrict the supply of fuel and kerosene.

(ii) There are increasing accusations against NGOs working in these areas, that they are supporting LTTE directly, or indirectly.

(iii) The Government is also very sensitive to what it perceives as one-sided criticism of its military offensive, and support only for humanitarian suffering of the Tamils, pointing to the number of Sinhalese villagers that have been killed or displaced by LTTE activities.

- f) Possible future developments.** The development of the humanitarian situation in the coming weeks and months will depend to a great extent on military and political activities. The LTTE seems to be moving the civilian population under its control into the Wanni region, and may be aiming to keep them there while it prepares for a protracted armed struggle. In this case, some 500,000 people from the Jaffna district are going to become semi-permanent IDPs, and a number of issues regarding their settlement and long-term upkeep are going to arise. The Government's stated wish is to attract the civilians to return to areas under its control. It has not, so far, indicated whether it intends to continue the military operation after capturing Jaffna, and if so, in which direction. It is, thus, hard to say to what extent the population will be able (or allowed) to move into these areas. There is always the possibility that the parties to the conflict may agree to negotiate a settlement, which could eventually lead to a political solution, and to the return and resettlement of the IDPs. Therefore, even medium-term solutions, such as

better shelter/housing settlement schemes, to say nothing of long-term activities, will be seen as interference in the political struggle for control over the population.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS A COMMON UN POLICY

- (a) It is imperative that all UN activities be coordinated by the UN Emergency Task Force. There is, at present, no need to establish new UN mechanisms for emergency relief operations.
- (b) It is recommended that at present, humanitarian operations continue on the basis of urgent needs, and that medium-term and long-term measures be considered as and when the situation becomes clearer.
- (c) The UN programme must be, and must be seen to be, impartial and based on purely humanitarian criteria.
- (d) The Government will not be appealing to international organisations for assistance, but will consider any offers that are made to it. The aim of the UN should be, while contributing to the Government's policy of humanitarian assistance to the affected population on both sides of the conflict line, to itself deliver tangible assistance to the civilian population affected by the conflict.
- (e) The UN should continue to provide a neutral presence in LTTE-controlled areas, monitoring its programme of assistance and assessing the humanitarian situation.
- (f) The UN should maintain a capability to monitor directly its assistance programmes to ensure impartiality in implementation. A presence should be maintained in areas which are affected by the conflict. In the event of the Government re-establishing control over Jaffna, the UN should consider re-establishing its presence in the town.
- (g) The UN should continue its role of facilitating the work of other humanitarian agencies, and actively advocate and support improved collaboration between NGOs and the Government. The role of international NGOs as a monitoring resource should also be advocated.