

The Increasingly Desperate Situation of the People Trapped in Vanni

As religious leaders, we are extremely concerned about the deteriorating plight of the civilians who are still trapped in the Vanni. Endless debates about the actual numbers trapped or who is primarily to be blamed for their plight are not the most urgent needs at this stage. The immediate and absolutely urgent need is to recognize that this is a very critical humanitarian crisis faced by fellow Sri Lankans. The needs of food, water, health, sanitation, shelter and, above all, physical security of these our sisters and brothers and children need to be addressed without delay. From all independent reports available, the plight of these trapped civilians has become absolutely desperate. These are people who over the past several years have lived under severe deprivations and restrictions and have in recent months been displaced several times over. We urge that all sides recognize the helplessness and powerlessness of these desperate Sri Lankans to change their circumstances or voice their fears and concerns. We earnestly appeal to all concerned to set aside debates on secondary issues and take immediate steps to alleviate their suffering.

We are grateful that a seven mile long strip has been declared by the Government of Sri Lanka as ðno-fireö zone. We trust that negotiations can be facilitated to ensure that there is bilateral agreement for this ðno-fireö zone and for the avoidance of the use of heavy artillery and multi-barrel shelling in the areas where civilians reside. We are also thankful that arrangements have been made for the sick and the injured to be transported by ship to Trincomalee for treatment. But in the prevailing desperate plight of civilians in the Vanni, we appeal to all parties, in the name of our religions and in the name of our common humanity, to have the humility and the courage to agree to the following:

1. Continue steady food supplies through the World Food Program as long as is necessary.
2. Continue the ferrying of the sick and injured persons through the ICRC to hospitals that are in a position to provide the necessary personnel and medicines to treat these people.
3. Negotiate and evacuate all civilians who wish to leave the conflict zone. For this purpose, a temporary cessation of fighting be agreed upon to enable this evacuation. As religious leaders, we are willing to attempt to facilitate, by ourselves or in association with others, negotiations towards a mutually acceptable agreement in this regard. We wish to emphasize that our concern is purely and primarily a temporary cessation of fighting for the sole humanitarian purpose of ensuring the safe evacuation of the civilians.
4. That the UN, ICRC and other reputed organizations, including clergy of all religions, be allowed into the Vanni during the temporary cessation of fighting to facilitate and monitor the evacuation and assist in the other humanitarian operations. This will bring credibility to all sides and also enhance the image our country.

Signed by:

The Rt Revd Dr Thomas Savundranayagam Roman Catholic Bishop of Jaffna
The Rt Revd Dr Rayappu Joseph Roman Catholic Bishop of Mannar
The Rt Revd Norbert Andradi Roman Catholic Bishop of Anuradhapura
The Rt Revd Kumara Illangasinghe Anglican Bishop of Kurunagala
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