

# Thousands trapped in 'catastrophic' Lanka conflict: ICRC

AFP, Geneva New Delhi

The Red Cross yesterday warned that the situation in Sri Lanka's conflict zone was "catastrophic" and called for immediate action to rescue tens of thousands of civilians trapped there.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it was concerned that the final offensive by government forces against fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) could lead to a "dramatic increase" in the number of civilian casualties.

The agency was "extremely worried about tens of thousands of civilians, including women, children and elderly people, many of them wounded or sick, who are trapped in the rapidly shrinking area along the coast that had been declared a 'no-fire zone' by the government."

"The situation is nothing short of catastrophic. Ongoing fighting has killed or wounded hundreds of civilians who

have only minimal access to medical care," said ICRC Director of Operations Pierre Kraehenbuehl.

"What we are seeing is intense fighting in a very small area overcrowded with civilians who have fled there," he added in a statement.

"It is imperative that independent humanitarian organizations also be allowed to provide desperately needed services and relief for civilians still trapped in the 'no-fire zone' today," Kraehenbuehl said.

The appeal came after the Sri Lankan army said Tuesday that more civilians have escaped from a patch of territory controlled by the rebel Tamil Tigers, including 39,081 people who had been registered on Monday.

Sri Lankan government force on Tuesday seized more territory from the Tamil Tigers as the rebels ignored a government deadline to surrender, the defence ministry said.

Meanwhile, the UN children's agency warned Tuesday that a threatened Sri Lankan assault against holdout Tamil Tiger rebels risked the lives of thousands of trapped children.

The government has given the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) a noon (0630 GMT) deadline to surrender, following a mass exodus Monday of around 35,000 civilians from the narrow sliver of jungle the guerrillas still control in northeast Sri Lanka.

But the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) said tens of thousands of civilians could still be trapped in LTTE territory, with the rebels preventing them from escaping.

"If fighting continues and if the LTTE refuses to allow people to leave the conflict zone, then we face the intolerable inevitability of seeing many more children killed," said Unicef's South Asia regional director, Daniel Toole.



PHOTO: AFP

This picture released by the Sri Lankan military yesterday shows what the army claims to be civilians escaping an area controlled by Tamil Tigers in north-eastern Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan army seized more ground from the Tamil Tigers on Tuesday as the rebels ignored a deadline to surrender.

## Clock ticking for Lankan civil war solution: US

AFP, Washington

A US official warned on Monday that time was running out for a deal that he hoped would bring lasting peace to Sri Lanka as he pressed for both sides to halt the fighting.

Sri Lankan authorities had set a deadline of midday (0630 GMT) Tuesday for the surrender of Tamil Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran and his cadres making a last stand among thousands of civilians in a northeastern sliver of the island.

The rebels ignored the deadline to surrender, as the Sri Lankan army Tuesday seized more territory from the Tigers, the defence ministry said.

US official Michael Owen said Sri Lanka

should offer a package in which the Tigers -- fighting since 1972 for a separate Tamil homeland -- hand in their arms, possibly to a third party, in exchange for amnesty for low-level cadres.

During the surrender, both sides would hold fire and let civilians leave, he said.

"We are running out of time," Owen, the acting deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asia, told the Brookings Institution think-tank. "Really, there is literally only a couple of days to try to get this finalised."

"It is something we have been working on very hard and quietly behind the scenes because the only potential we see to bringing this to an end is to have a package in which we have a pause and civilians are allowed to leave," he said.

## Lanka war unites European Tamils in protest

AFP, Paris

Anger at a fierce Sri Lankan army offensive in their homeland has brought thousands of Tamils into the streets of Paris and shone a light on their well-organised and successful European diaspora.

In Sri Lanka, government forces believe they are on the verge of victory after more than three decades of war against the separatist fighters battling to carve out an independent Tamil state on the Sinhalese-majority island.

But while the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are on the back foot at home,

tens of thousands of Tamils have come out in the streets of far-off European cities to demand an international response to the offensive.

On Monday, protests in the so-called "Little Jaffna" district of northern Paris -- an immigrant district nicknamed after the main town in the Tamil area of Sri Lanka -- turned violent for the first time.

Young Tamils, some recent arrivals and some French-born sons and daughters of immigrants, pelted police with stones and bottles and smashed up two buses. Around 200 rioters were arrested.

## 'Top Qaeda, Taliban leadership based in Pakistan'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

Warning that the top leadership of al-Qaeda and Taliban was most likely based in Pakistan, a US South Asia expert has suggested that President Barack Obama shift the focus of his much talked about Afghanistan-Pakistan policy to Pakistan.

As a narrow focus on counter-terrorism is insufficient to protect US interests in South Asia, Daniel Markey, a senior fellow for India, Pakistan and South Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations - a

Washington think tank, also advocated a long-term approach including encouraging rapprochement between India and Pakistan.

"Over the past two years, the security environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan has taken a significant turn for the worse," Markey said.

Besides al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the Pashtun belt, a range of other violent actors from Punjabi anti-Indian extremists to Central Asian warlords operates in the non-Pashtun areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

offer these groups an unusually hospitable environment, one that complicates and magnifies the danger, he said suggesting "Today, al-Qaeda's top leadership is most likely based in Pakistan, along with top Taliban leaders, both Afghan and Pakistani."

Pakistan's non-Pashtun extremist and sectarian groups, some of which were historically nurtured by the state as a means to project influence into India and Afghanistan, also have the potential to prove deeply destabilising.

## Pak provincial assembly's deputy speaker killed

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, PTI, Islamabad

Deputy Speaker of Northern Areas Legislative Assembly (NALA) Syed Asad Zaidi was killed by gunmen in Gilgit region in north Pakistan, Geo TV reported yesterday.

Zaidi was killed when unidentified gunmen ambushed his official vehicle. A police official said that one person died on the spot, while the deputy speaker and another man sustained critical injuries in the attack.

They were shifted to a hospital where doctors operated upon the deputy speaker, but he succumbed to his

injuries. The people of Gilgit, Skardu and other areas mourned the killing of the speaker with the provincial government announcing a one-day mourning Tuesday. Educational institutions and government offices were closed and traders shut their establishments.

Earlier Taliban militants in Pakistan's troubled Swat valley have kidnapped 10 people, including six security personnel, from different areas of the restive valley.

The militants picked up four security personnel from the bazaar in Khwazakheh town on Monday, media reports said.

## Now Sharif warns against impending Taliban threat to Pakistan's existence

ANI, Lahore

Former Pakistan prime minister and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) chief Nawaz Sharif has said that following forcing the government to give in to its demand to implement Islamic law in the Swat Valley, the Taliban is now aiming to establish its writ over other parts of the country too.

In an interview with USA Today here, Sharif expressed concern over the precarious situation emerging out from the deal inked between the government and the Taliban.

"They are now threatening to get out of Swat and take other areas into their custody. So we've got to avoid that situation," Sharif told USA Today.

He stressed that any deal with the insurgents must include a pledge on the part of the militants that 'democracy will not be allowed to deteriorate, and the writ of the government will be honoured' in all circumstances.

Sharif, who took to streets against the Zardari regime and led scores of protesters urging them to initiate a revolution to topple the government, how-

ever, backed from his stance saying disputes should be resolved in Parliament, not on the streets.

"This country cannot afford any confrontation. We're not going to put our country in jeopardy power. Grabbing power at any cost is not our motto," Sharif said, adding "Our motto is to get the country back on the rails of democracy, strengthen institutions like the judiciary and media and take necessary steps to prevent anybody from abrogating or suspending the constitution."



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani paramilitary troops patrol a street in Islamabad yesterday. The United States has put the nuclear-armed Muslim nation at the heart of efforts to defeat al-Qaeda and has repeatedly called on Pakistan to do more to flush out hardline Islamist extremists hunkered down in the tribal areas.

## Hawking remains hospitalised

AP, London

Cambridge University says mathematician and physicist Stephen Hawking remains hospitalised.

Gregory Hayman, the university's head of communications, said Tuesday that Hawking "was comfortable and kept in overnight" at Addenbrooke's Hospital. Hawking has been described as feeling "very ill."

Hayman has said the British mathematician and physicist was fighting a chest infection.

Hawking, 67, gained renown for his work on black holes and has remained active despite being diagnosed at age 21 with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), an incurable degenerative disorder also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents of Kiangomara village flee yesterday after a small group of them armed with crude weapons decided to fight back against the Mungiki, a violent mafia-like extortionist group famous for beheading and skinning its victims. Residents of the central Kenyan town took up arms against the gang, sparking fierce battles in which at least 29 people were stoned and hacked to death.

## 29 killed as Kenya town battles violent gang

AFP, Karatina

Vigilantes in a central Kenyan town took up arms against a violent gang, sparking fierce battles in which at least 29 people were stoned and hacked to death, police and medics said yesterday.

The clashes started late Monday when residents organised in small groups armed with crude weapons decided to fight back against

the Mungiki, a violent mafia-like extortionist group infamous for beheading and skinning its victims.

"We have so far received 29 bodies. Most of them have their arms chopped off," said Doctor David Ndegwa, at the hospital in Karatina, the epicentre of the clashes north of Nairobi.

"We are not able to tell who is Mungiki and who is not," national police spokesman

Eric Kiraithe told AFP. "It's a very bad scene."

Karatina woke up to scenes of carnage and destruction, with bodies strewn across the streets in pools of blood and corrugated iron sheds demolished or torched by the fighting.

Police arrived in the town on Tuesday and combed through outlying tea plantations for suspects and discarded weapons.

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We pray to the Almighty for his departed soul and convey our deepest sympathy and prayer for the bereaved family.

The lamenting colleagues,  
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