

Opening Remarks by B. Lynn Pascoe  
Press Conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka  
18 September, 2009

INTRO

- Sri Lanka's armed conflict has been a matter of concern for a very long time at the United Nations, and particularly since the conflict intensified sharply about a year ago.
- The Secretary-General was active throughout that period and outspoken in calling for the protection of civilians and urging an orderly end to the conflict. He visited Sri Lanka in May, shortly after the fighting ended and expressed the desire of the UN to help Sri Lanka deal with the many postwar challenges it now faces. He signed a joint statement with President Rajapaksa that included commitments on a number of key issues related to the aftermath of the conflict – resettlement of IDPs, political reconciliation and human rights accountability.
- Following their telephone conversation earlier this week the Secretary-General asked me to come to Sri Lanka for a thorough discussion on what needs to be done to move forward on these issues. They are fundamental for building a lasting peace in Sri Lanka, and we have not seen the progress we expected after the agreement.
- We have had a full program over the past two days, starting with an informative visit to the north yesterday which I'll describe in greater detail in a moment. We held meetings with President Rajapaksa and other senior officials of the government and military; discussions with the leader of the Opposition and the Tamil National Alliance, as well as with human rights NGOs and other leaders in civil society. We have met with key donor countries, humanitarian agencies and of course with the UN Country Team led admirably here by the RC, Neil Buhne.

## IDPs

- A critical focus of my discussions has been the issue of the IDPS in the camps and the importance of moving them out quickly and back to their homes.
- Yesterday in the north, we traveled to Mannar, Jaffna and Vavuniya:
  - In the Mannar area, we witnessed crews repairing roads and a school, as well as construction work on a large water reservoir to serve some 2,500 families slated to be resettled next week. We saw work being done in preparing rice fields for planting before the monsoons. We received a briefing and demonstration by the military on progress in clearing mines out of the Mannar Rice Bowl region.
  - In Jaffna, we visited two IDP camps: (a) The Kopai camp housing about four hundred people uprooted during fighting in the final two months of last year; and (b) the Kaidhely University Hostel, which houses more than 500 people who arrived about a week ago from Manik Farms. Also in Jaffna, we visited a rehabilitation center for former LTTE members, about 150 men and women.
  - We ended the trip in Vavuniya, at the Manik Farms camp. We witnessed food distribution and had an opportunity to talk to IDPs and camp administrators.
- Today, we elaborated on the concerns raised by the Secretary-General, and had an active discussion with the President and key government officials. We received more information from the government on its thinking and plans for returns in the period ahead. They told us they maintain their previously stated goal of moving 70-80% of IDPs out of the camps and home by the end of the year, and in fully implementing their 180 day plan.
- Clearly the government is making efforts, but we have strong concerns on several points:

- First, the United Nations is very concerned about the lack of Freedom of Movement for IDPs, and in particular, the closed nature of the camps. People are not free to come or go and they are understandably upset. We picked up great frustration on this point in the camps that we visited yesterday. I was told by many – and quite emphatically -- that they just want to go home. We understand there are security concerns to be addressed. At the same time, this kind of closed regime goes directly against the principles under which we work in assisting IDPs all around the world. We have urged the government to take the following steps:
  - To allow those who have completed the screening process to leave the camps as they choose.
  - For those remaining in the camps, at the very least, they should be able to leave the camps during the daytime, and to freely visit friends and family in other sites.
  
- I am pleased there will be a visit next week by Walter Keilin, the Secretary-General's representative on the rights of IDPs, and I hope that proves productive in ensuring the rights of the people in the camps are respected.
  
- A second issue is the pace of the process. This is becoming an even more critical concern in light of the coming monsoons. The returns need to happen, and happen quickly. We are convinced they can, and we've shared our thoughts with the government on that point. If there is more screening to do, it should be speeded up. It appears there are areas where demining is not a big concern. For those areas, families who have passed the screening process could be resettled without much further delay. More people should be allowed to stay with relatives and host families.
  
- Today, the government informed us of two steps they intend to take to ease the situation: One is to provide day passes that would allow people to go out and work or visit family and friends. The second is to more aggressively publicize the option of accommodation with relatives and other host families. Of course this is not the ultimate solution to the problem of getting people home quickly, but is an interim measure that reduces congestion in the camps.

- Third, there needs to be greater transparency and consultation-- both with the international community which is being asked to support the process and the IDPs themselves who are expressing a great deal of anguish and uncertainty. We have encouraged the government to present a clear, well-stated plan and to carry on an open dialogue with the United Nations, donors and NGOs. One of the main complaints I heard from IDPs in the north is their anxiety at not knowing when they will be able to go home. One solution is to consult much more extensively with IDP leaders.
- We are spending a lot of time and energy on the IDP issues because it's critical not only for those men, women and children in the camps, but also for the political future of the country. This is an opportunity to move beyond simply ending the fighting to solidifying the peace,. As the situation currently stands in the camps, there is a real risk of breeding resentment that will undermine the prospects for political reconciliation in the future.
- I should note we also discussed the issue of the treatment and the future of persons being held separately after surrendering or on suspicion of being LTTE or associated with the LTTE. This is a matter that will continue to be monitored.

## POLITICAL RECONCILIATION

- Political reconciliation is another of the key issues for the country, and one of the points on the Joint Statement agreed between President Rajapaksa and the Secretary-General in May.
- A military solution does not resolve the underlying political issues that must be managed in order for peace to last.
- What we are looking for are signs of a serious effort at outreach to Tamil and other minorities to address aspirations and grievances of all Sri Lankans. That's the basis of a lasting peace.
- Failure to win the trust and confidence of the population in the North, especially those in the IDP camps, could undermine the prospects for reconciliation.

It is important that a process begin very soon. The President assured me of his commitment to find a durable political solution and said he has initiated a process of dialogue with the TNA which he will pursue even as he prepares for elections.

- In my meeting today with TNA parliamentarians, they assured me of their willingness to engage with the Government. I also met with the Opposition Leader.
- We look forward to hearing more on how this process can move forward in the near future. The United Nations is willing to help in any appropriate way.

## HUMAN RIGHTS ACCOUNTABILITY

- As you know, the UN has dealt with the aftermath of many conflicts around the world, and has learnt that moving forward and building peace sometimes requires finding a way to address issues of accountability.
- Coming to grips with the past is difficult. Sweeping it under the rug could be a tempting shortcut, but it can have a high price at a later time.
- We feel that ideally, the Sri Lankans should carry out a national process of truth-seeking and accountability. But at the same time, the process has to be serious, independent and impartial.
- I discussed this issue with the government, and stressed that this could help national reconciliation, and set a foundation on which the new Sri Lanka can be built.

## UNITED NATIONS AND SRI LANKA

- Let me conclude by saying a few words about the United Nations and its role in trying to help Sri Lanka deal with these and other kinds of challenges.

- I had a close look at that yesterday up in the north, where a number of UN agencies – UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF and others, and their partners - are a big part of the efforts to care for people in need. These UN people are idealistic, energetic people who are living far away from their homes, often in difficult situations, to help make life better for Sri Lankans.
- For us to work effectively with the Sri Lankan people, the UN's privileges and immunities must be respected. In this regard, I raised our concerns over the detention of two UN staff members and the expulsion of the UNICEF spokesman.
- In the end, Sri Lanka is an energetic member of the United Nations, and it is important that we are able to have a constructive dialogue about our disagreements. The United Nations is here to help, and will do whatever it can to help Sri Lanka move forward. Our commitment is clear, and much remains to be done.

END