

Statement on Space for Humanitarian Work: Issues of Safety, Access and Restrictions

The escalation of violence in the North East has led to an increase in human rights violations and threats to human security, with more civilians and communities being affected either through loss of life and increased suffering, displacement, the loss of livelihoods and restrictions on movement. During the period between April- August 2006, it is estimated that there are over 100,000 new internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 6000 persons who have fled as refugees to India. In addition, as a direct result of the violence in the North East, many communities have been isolated with limited or no humanitarian assistance reaching them.

In the North East of Sri Lanka where there is an urgent need for humanitarian action and assistance, many actors including the government, national and international organizations need to work together to address the daunting task of ensuring that basic services are provided to all affected communities and that the return to normalcy is facilitated. **It is imperative that NGOs and INGOs that performed an invaluable role in the conflict and the tsunami humanitarian activities continue to operate without hindrance.**

With the escalation of violence, a significant development has been security threats and attacks faced by humanitarian and medical actors in the North East. Recent incidents of violence include:

- Grenade attack on the offices of ZOA, Inter SOS and NVPF in Muttur on 21st May 2006, injuring one international staff member and two local staff members.
- Claymore attack in Batticaloa on 7th June 2006, killing a ZOA staff member.
- Killing of 17 Action Contre La Faim (ACF) local staff members in Muttur on 5th August 2006.
- Shooting at three ambulances, one in Puthukudiyiruppu on 8th August 2006, killing five persons and two in Muttur on 2nd August 2006, killing three persons.
- Hijacking an ambulance belonging to the Sri Lanka Red Cross in Mannar on 8th August 2006.

In addition to the security threats faced by humanitarian actors, there have been various obstacles hampering effective and efficient delivery of humanitarian assistance. Restrictions imposed by the Government including the delay in issuing work permits and travel restrictions in both Government and LTTE controlled areas, have created a climate of confusion and constrained the movement of humanitarian agencies. Of particular concern are the problems faced by several organizations working in the North East from military personnel who have insisted that organizations provide a permit issued by the MOD and threatened INGO staff members with arrest if such a requirement was not met. On contacting the MOD, agencies have been informed that there is no requirement for such a permit. Unfortunately, there seems to be confusion regarding this issue among military officials in certain parts of the North East. This has led to the harassment and threats against humanitarian staff members, as well as restrictions on their movement.

Additionally, there is a delay in the issuing of work permits to international staff working with NGOs and INGOs by the Government - the two ministries involved in the process being the Ministry of Social Services and Social Welfare and the MOD. At present international staff at both NGOs and INGOs can be employed and carry out their functions until the 31st of August 2006. According to present regulations, from the 1st of September 2006, international staff cannot be employed if they have not received the work permit. Consequently there is the possibility that many NGOs and INGOs will be affected if the MOD does not expedite the process of issuing work permits. Non issuance or the delay in issuing work permits will result in the reduction of staff and thereby adversely affect the activities undertaken by the agencies.

As highlighted, the deteriorating security environment in the North East and the restrictions imposed by the Government will ultimately adversely impact the necessary humanitarian initiatives that are underway in the North East. Any curtailment of projects will have dire consequences on the civilian population and the provision of humanitarian assistance. It will slow down the reconstruction process in Sri Lanka. Faced with so many challenges, humanitarian agencies are increasingly questioning their ability to function, raising the likelihood of them limiting their presence and even complete withdrawal.

While urging both parties to **cease all hostilities** and **ensure the protection of civilians**, measures must also be taken to address the issues faced by humanitarian actors.

In the present situation, we urge the Government to take the following measures-

- 1) Ensure the security of humanitarian and medical staff, and provide an enabling safe environment to carry out their activities
- 2) Clarify whether MOD permits are required by NGOs and INGOs to work in the North East, and to clearly set out what the requirements are to be active in these areas
- 3) Speed up the process in issuing work permits for international staff working with NGOs and INGOs, ensuring that the process is efficient and transparent

Further, we urge the LTTE to take the following measure-

- 1) Ensure the security of humanitarian and medical staff, providing an enabling environment to carry out their activities

Signatories:

Association of War Affected Women
Centre for Policy Alternatives
Foundation for Co-Existence
Human Development Organisation
International Centre for Ethnic Studies
International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism
INFORM
Law and Society Trust
Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform
Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum
National Peace Council
Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust
Social Scientists' Association
Women and Media Collective

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