

Sri Lankans in 'catastrophic' situation

By KRISHAN FRANCIS
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Tens of thousands of civilians trapped in Sri Lanka's northern war zone face a "catastrophic" situation, the Red Cross said Tuesday, amid fears a final assault against the Tamil Tiger rebels would lead to a dramatic rise in casualties. The United Nations and others have called for a negotiated truce to allow civilians to leave the rebel-held coastal strip — and the government says more than 52,000 had escaped since Monday.

But it has refused to heed the international pleas to halt the fighting, saying it is on the verge of crushing the separatists and putting an end to the 25-year-old war.

The U.N. estimated more than 4,500 civilians have been killed in the past three months.

The rebels said more than 1,000 civilians died Monday in a government raid, while the government said it rescued thousands after they broke through a barrier built by the insurgents that protects their last stronghold.

Human rights groups say the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are holding many people in the enclave against their will and using them as human shields. Those groups have also accused the government of

indiscriminate shelling in the region. Both sides deny the allegations. Thousands of civilians also fled in packed small boats, and they were picked up by navy patrols and transported to camps where Tamils who have escaped the war are being held. More than 2,000 people in about 100 boats were picked up Monday. The Red Cross said about 50,000 civilians were still stranded, while Human Rights Watch put the number between 50,000 and 100,000.

The U.S. government released satellite images Tuesday showing about 25,000 tents housing civilians squeezed into the last small strip controlled by the rebels, a coastal strip of about only 8 square miles (21 square kilometers). The State Department estimated about 125,000 people were in the conflict zone before the exodus over the past two days.

A worker for Doctors Without Borders said hundreds of wounded were arriving at her hospital in Vavuniya, south of the war zone, in government-arranged buses, and some had died en route. The hospital is overcrowded with 1,200 people being accommodated in a facility with only 400 beds, said mental health officer Karen Stewart, according to a statement from the aid group.

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres was concerned about

the "dramatic situation" for civilians still in the war zone, said commission spokesman Ron Redmond.

"There are innocent civilians — women and children — caught in the middle of the conflict ... so the high commissioner is saying there should be a pause in the hostilities and the LTTE should allow civilians to leave," Redmond said.

Military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara denied that 1,000 civilians died, saying 17 civilians were killed Monday by rebel shelling and by three suicide bombers.

"Our troops are rescuing the trapped civilians. It's the LTTE which is preventing civilians from fleeing," Nanayakkara said.

It was impossible to get independent accounts of casualties because journalists are restricted from the war zone.

The number of fleeing civilians made it clear that the government had vastly underestimated how many people were caught in the fighting.

"Both sides need to show far greater concern for civilians, or many more civilians will die," said Brad Adams, Asia director for the New York-based group Human Rights Watch.

A final government offensive "could lead to a dramatic increase in the number of civilian casualties," the International Committee of the Red

Cross said.

"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 Red Cross operations director Pierre Kraehenbuehl. "I cannot remember ... as much concentrated pain and exposure to violence with very, very minimal possibilities to reach anywhere that could be called safe." The U.N. Children's Fund South Asia director Daniel Toole said he was worried about the safety of children still in the war zone because "our greatest fear is that the worst is yet to come."

The military spokesman said there was no fighting Tuesday evening, adding that it avoids using heavy, long-range weapons.

Nanayakkara said 39,081 civilians fled the war zone Monday, the most in a single day, and at least 13,000 people crossed over Tuesday, with the stream continuing.

State Department spokesman Robert Wood said the U.S. was pleased so many civilians had fled, but he remained concerned about what he called credible reports of increasing casualties and indiscriminate firing on civilians by rebel forces.

Encouraged by the exodus, the government Monday asked the rebels

to surrender within 24 hours, warning of a final assault if they failed. The ultimatum expired at noon (2:30 a.m. EDT) Tuesday without a response from the rebels.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa rejected a call by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown for a pause in the fighting, his office said Tuesday. The president's office said in a statement that Rajapaksa deemed a pause "unnecessary" considering the "unexpected exodus of civilians" when the two leaders had spoken by phone Monday.

Red Cross spokeswoman Sarasi Wijeratne said the organization could not confirm or deny the figures quoted by the military. According to figures received by the Red Cross, 11,000 people crossed the front lines Monday and another 5,000 came Tuesday, she said.

The U.N. refugee agency said it is ready to provide shelter and aid to tens of thousands of displaced civilians.

Redmond said the UNHCR was working with the government to make more land available for displacement camps because existing sites were overcrowded, he said.

The rebels have fought since 1983 for an independent state for Sri Lanka's ethnic minority Tamils. More than 70,000 people have been killed in the years of violence.

Two Central PA friends send 217,000 text messages in one month

By BILL BERGSTROM
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Their thumbs sure must be sore. Two central Pennsylvania friends spent most of March in a text-messaging record attempt, exchanging a thumbs-flying total of 217,000.

For one of the two, that meant an inches-thick itemized bill for \$26,000.

Nick Andes, 29, and Doug Klinger, 30, were relying on their unlimited text messaging plans to get them through the escapade, so Andes didn't expect such a big bill.

"It came in a box that cost \$27.55 to send to me," he said Tuesday. He said he "panicked" and called T-Mobile, which told The Associated Press it had credited his account and was investigating the charges.

The two Lancaster-area residents have been practically nonstop texters for about a decade since they attended Berks Technical Institute together.

That led Andes to search for the

largest monthly text message total he could find posted online: 182,000 sent in 2005 by Deepak Sharma in India.

Andes and Klinger were able to set up their phones to send multiple messages. During a February test run they found they could send 6,000 or 7,000 messages on some days, prompting the March messaging marathon.

"Most were either short phrases or one word, 'LOL' or 'Hello,' things like that, with tons and tons of repeats," said Andes, reached by phone.

Andes sent more than 140,000 messages, and Klinger sent more than 70,000 to end the month with a total of just over 217,000, he said.

A spokesman for Guinness World Records didn't immediately return messages asking whether it would be certified as a record.

April came as a relief to Andes' wife, Julie, who had found his phone tied up with texting when she tried to call him on lunch breaks.

"She was tired of it the first few days into it," Andes said.

Guantanamo-Obama's Plan

By ANDREW O. SELSKY
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President Barack Obama came under fire Tuesday for including \$80 million to close Guantanamo in a massive funding request to fight America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The \$83.4 billion request to Congress was submitted on April 9, when lawmakers were on break over the Easter holidays. Tucked into the 99-page bill were a few paragraphs about Guantanamo — including a request for funds for foreign countries that accept prisoners. U.S. efforts to have other countries take in detainees have largely been a flop — stoking fears the men will end up in America.

"The administration needs to tell the American people what it plans to do with these men if they close Guantanamo," U.S. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell

said on the Senate floor Tuesday. He pointed out that two years ago the Senate voted 94-3 against sending detainees to the U.S. McConnell opposes closing Guantanamo.

"Foreign countries have thus far been unwilling to take them in any significant numbers. And even if countries were willing to take them, there's an increasing probability that some of these murderers would return to the battlefield," he said.

Military Families United, a military family advocacy organization, predicted the inclusion of money to close Guantanamo in the war-funding request "will significantly delay the passage of this legislation and delay our troops from getting the funding they need and deserve."

"Funding for our troops cannot be made contingent on funding for an unrelated and politically divisive issue like the closure of Guantanamo Bay," the group said. McConnell spokesman Don Stewart said Republicans are looking at ways to strip the Guantanamo money from the funding bill. There is no move afoot to block the entire funding bill because "this is money for our troops,"

Stewart said.

Obama seeks \$30 million in Justice Department funding to shut down the Guantanamo detention center, review U.S. detention and interrogation procedures and fund future litigation.

Another \$50 million in Defense Department funds sought by Obama would support the relocation of the 240 prisoners at Guantanamo, which Obama has ordered closed by January, and redeploy military and support forces associated with the detention center on the Navy base.

Some of the \$50 million would also "provide assistance to foreign nations" as detainees are relocated.

The U.S. wants to resettle dozens of Guantanamo prisoners in foreign lands, but countries have been reluctant to take them because of security concerns.

A senior Obama administration official indicated Tuesday that some of the funding could be used to help foreign nations pay for rehabilitation programs. The official was not authorized to discuss the issue publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.