

Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

P.O. Box 667 - 26 West 171 Roosevelt Road
Wheaton, IL 60189-0667
(630) 909-6635
justicepeace@wheatonfranciscan.org



President Barack H. Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

April 6, 2009

Dear Mr. President,

We are writing to you as members of the Franciscan Family of COUNTRY [any further details?]. We wish to express to you our deepest concern over the situation of hundreds of thousands of civilians adversely affected by the ongoing conflict in the Vanni, Northern Sri Lanka and kindly urge you to help improve this situation.

At least 150,000 civilians remain trapped in the area where the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are conducting their military operations. According to religious personnel in the Vanni both parties conduct their military operations in and around the "safety zone" established. Civilians believe that the safety zone has never been safe and they have continually feared for their lives. In fact, there have been hundreds of civilian casualties and seriously wounded due to continuous shelling. In addition, foreign NGOs and UN agencies were forced to leave the Vanni. This has contributed to the progressive deterioration of the living conditions in the area, including the starvation of a large portion the civilians in the area and the lack of medicines for first aid.

It is estimated that 35,000 civilians have now moved to government-controlled camps, deemed "High Security Zones", and are living in very harsh conditions, with limited food rations, cramped into areas not fit for human habitation and their freedom of movement is restricted. A number of clergy working in Vavuniya camp, have expressed concern about cases of enforced disappearances, particularly of young Tamils.

From firsthand experience of Franciscans trapped in the Vanni, we learnt that after attempting to escape the Vanni through the jungle, they and other civilians were intercepted by LTTE cadres and forced to return. It is reported that the LTTE responds to such attempts with violence and continues to force them to stay in the Vanni. The LTTE must respect the freedom of movement of civilians and allow them to flee the conflict area.

In the light of the gravity of the situation, we call you to urge all parties to the conflict to take all necessary steps to ensure the protection of the affected population, in particular to distinguish between civilians and combatants and respect the safety zone. We also call you to remind the Sri Lankan authorities their responsibility to meet the needs of the victims of the conflict (including providing urgent medical assistance, with special attention to the needs of women, children and the elderly) and to urge them to grant free and unfettered access to humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance and monitor the security of civilians.

Thank you for your attention on this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

"If you want peace, work for justice"