

PEOPLE FOR EQUALITY AND RELIEF IN LANKA

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For Immediate Release

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U.S. Troops Plan Evacuation in Sri Lanka: Sign Death Warrants for Hundreds of Thousands, Support Ethnic Cleansing

Washington, DC March 2, 2009 – Credible reports from Colombo, Sri Lanka reveal the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) is planning to lead an evacuation of nearly 200,000 Tamil civilians trapped in the war-torn northern region of Sri Lanka. These civilians have been besieged by the Sri Lankan government's military offensive, which has raged on since September, costing the lives of over 2,000 Tamil civilians and wounding another 7,000 Tamil civilians. If PACOM evacuates these civilians, they support the government's campaign of ethnic cleansing of these traditionally Tamil areas.

Reports reveal that PACOM is planning to evacuate these civilians and deliver them to the Sri Lankan government – who would then imprison them in concentration-style internment camps. Human Rights Watch and other humanitarian agencies have criticized the Sri Lankan government for its treatment of refugees: forcibly keeping them in internment camps, separated from family, secluded from international aid agencies, as they are harshly interrogated and abused. HRW has reported that refugees are “held by the government in squalid military-controlled camps and hospitals with little access to the outside world The government seems to be trying its best to keep its role in their ordeal away from public scrutiny.”

“PACOM evacuating these Tamil civilians is equivalent to signing their death warrants. These people have been bombed for months by this genocidal government; evacuating them from Vanni and delivering them to the Sri Lankan government is equivalent to being an accomplice to genocide,” PEARL representative Rosha Hebsur said. “These refugees would be handed over to the Sri Lankan government, who would then have free reign to lock them away and continue their genocide against Tamils in silence. As American citizens, it is our duty to ensure this is not the fate of these 200,000 Tamil civilians. I don't want their blood on my hands, and I hope PACOM doesn't want it on their hands either.”

Human Rights Watch has condemned the “slaughter” of Tamil civilians it witnessed in northern Sri Lanka, where the government continues an intensive military offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Instead of an evacuation, PEARL is urging the U.S. government to expand the “safe zone” these civilians are in, and strengthen their security by allowing aid workers, journalists and human rights monitors full access to the region. PEARL is also asking the U.S. government to pressure the Sri Lankan government to accept a ceasefire to provide respite to these besieged civilians.

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