

## **Pope Pleads for Protection, Assistance for Sri Lankan Refugees**

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May 18, 2009

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- As the government of Sri Lanka declared victory over Tamil separatists engaged in a 26-year battle for independence, Pope Benedict XVI appealed to both sides to protect civilians and asked the international community to provide aid to tens of thousands of refugees.

In northern Sri Lanka, there are "thousands of children, women and elderly from whom the war has taken years of life and of hope," the pope said May 17.

Speaking during his midday "Regina Coeli" address at the Vatican, the pope asked government and rebel troops to facilitate the evacuation of civilians, guaranteeing their safety.

"I also ask humanitarian institutions, including Catholic ones, not to leave anything untried in meeting the urgent need of the refugees for food and medicine," the pope said.

The Associated Press May 18 quoted Sri Lankan military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara as saying civilians who had been trapped in the war zone -- 63,000 in all -- had fled to safety during the previous 72 hours. But rebel official Selvarasa Pathmanathan told the AP that the bodies of thousands of wounded and slain civilians lay strewn across the war zone.

"This battle has reached its bitter end," Pathmanathan said in a statement e-mailed to the AP. "It is our people who are dying now from bombs, shells, illness and hunger. We cannot permit any more harm to befall them. We remain with one last choice -- to remove the last weak excuse of the enemy for killing our people. We have decided to silence our guns."

Speaking to Catholic News Service May 13 by telephone from a fortified bunker in Mulliavaikkal, Sri Lanka, Father Saviripillai Edmund Reginald said, "It's a very, very, very bad situation here. The people here are desperate, and they need help from outside. They need food. They need medicine. They need medical facilities. It's a human catastrophe."

What appears to be the final round of fighting began when government troops broke through positions held by Tamil separatists near previously declared no-fire zones, forcing thousands of civilians to flee. The separatists, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or Tamil Tigers, were pushed onto a narrow peninsula on Sri Lanka's north coast.

Since the ethnic Tamil separatists began their campaign in 1983, protesting discrimination at the hands of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority, more than 80,000 people have died.

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