



media release

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SRI LANKA - TIME FOR AUSTRALIA'S VOICE TO BE HEARD

“Unless the Sri Lankan government’s decision yesterday to ban foreign humanitarian workers from the north of that country is changed, an avoidable humanitarian disaster will unfold over the next several months in this part of Australia’s neighbourhood,” said Paul O’Callaghan, ACFID’s Executive Director.

“Sri Lanka’s civil war has continued since 1983, with 70,000 victims so far. The scale of civilian suffering in the north prior to the current military campaign was large, with 40% of the children malnourished and over 150,000 people displaced. We anticipate that tens of thousands more civilians will be displaced in the weeks ahead,” he said.

“The United Nations Human Rights Council expressed concern in July 2008 at the Sri Lankan government’s restrictions on food, medicine and other materials reaching displaced civilians and on other human rights matters. The Sri Lankan government made commitments at that time to ensure protection for displaced communities and their access to food and medicine. Yesterday’s decision cuts across that commitment,” he said.

“In light of the ban on humanitarian agencies and expected larger scale humanitarian crisis in the north, Prime Minister Rudd should publicly urge his Sri Lankan counterpart to take action to protect innocent civilians and ensure access to humanitarian aid. He should seek a commitment to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and a re-opening of the A9 highway, so that essential medicine, food and materials can get through to displaced communities,” he said.

“Australia should also become an active contributor to ongoing international efforts to bring the conflicting Sri Lankan parties back to the negotiation table. In addition to the fact that Sri Lanka is a regional neighbour, Australia has the credentials and capacity to make a vital contribution to brokering a lasting political solution, without which the civil war is sure to continue for many years to come.” he said.

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