

Lanka's war-ravaged Wannu hospitals face medical shortage: ICRC

Ringu alarm bells, the International Red Cross said Thursday that hospitals in Sri Lanka's war-ravaged northern Wannu region are facing severe shortage of medical staff and medicines including normal pain killers, despite increasing war casualties.

'The lack of regular deliveries of supplies from the country's health ministry has resulted in clinics and hospitals in the Wannu region running out of basic medicines such as paracetamol, antibiotics and vaccines,' the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said in a statement.

The Wannu region comprises four northern districts of Sri Lanka - Vavuniya, Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Among these, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu are under full control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) while parts of the other two have been under their control for well over two decades.

'The limited number of staff available to care for routine cases alongside war casualties has become a critical issue for several hospitals in northern Sri Lanka,' the ICRC said.

'Under international humanitarian law applicable in armed-conflict situations, people not involved in fighting, including the wounded and sick, whether they be civilians or fighters, must be given any medical care they may require as quickly as possible,' the ICRC highlighted in its statement.

The latest medical crisis has arisen despite the fact that the ICRC, by agreement with Sri Lanka's health ministry, has been providing hospitals in Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya districts with medical equipment and supplies for the treatment of sick and war-wounded people.

The ICRC statement has come at a time when the advancing government troops and the LTTE are locked in fierce combat for months in the Wannu and northwestern Mannar districts.

There was no immediate reaction from the government in this regard.

Scores of combatants have been killed and several thousands wounded during these clashes, with the government vowing to capture areas under the control of the LTTE.

Pointing out that the residents in the government-held northern Jaffna peninsula are unable to obtain certain healthcare services, the ICRC said that it airlifts patients between Jaffna and Colombo twice a week 'to ensure that appropriate levels of health care are nevertheless available to them'.

The ICRC staff is present six days a week at the Omanthai entry/exit point in Vavuniya to facilitate smooth passage of vehicles and civilians between areas controlled by the government and the LTTE.

It also helps the warring parties by facilitating the transfer of bodies of the combatants killed during clashes.

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