

## US expresses concern over Sri Lanka situation, calls for halt to war

The US Saturday expressed deep concern over the plight of civilians caught in the conflict between the Sri Lankan military and the Tamil Tigers and has called on both sides to stop fighting.

'The United States is deeply concerned about the plight of innocent civilians caught up in the conflict between the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers, and the mounting death toll. We call on both sides to stop fighting immediately and allow civilians to safely leave the combat zone,' said a statement issued by the White House.

The statement also called upon the Sri Lankan government to stop shelling the safe zone and blocking international aid groups and media from accessing those civilians who have managed to escape.

'International aid workers should have access to all sites where internally displaced persons are being registered and sheltered.'

The Sri Lankan military estimates that 106,000 Tamil civilians - men, women and children - have so far fled the LTTE zone and taken shelter in military-held areas.

'We call on both sides to strictly adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law. We are very concerned about reports of violations, and take these allegations very seriously.'

'It would compound the current tragedy if the military end of the conflict only breeds further enmity and ends hopes for reconciliation and a unified Sri Lanka in the future.'

Government troops are fighting their way into some of the last Tamil rebel-held areas in north-eastern Sri Lanka. Rebels are now reportedly confined to an area of eight sq km in Mullaitivu district, 395 km from the capital.

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