

Sri Lanka: several thousands reported fleeing intensified government-rebel fighting – UN

19 January 2007 – Several thousand more people began fleeing an embattled separatist rebel-held pocket of land on **Sri Lanka**'s east coast today towards Government positions as Government forces were reported to be advancing amid intensified fighting, the United Nations refugee agency said.

“We call on both parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and their freedom of movement,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesman Ron Redmond [told](#) a news briefing in Geneva, noting that this is the second large-scale exodus from the area in a month.

In late December 2006, over 20,000 civilians previously trapped by fighting between **Sri Lanka** forces and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fled across swollen rivers and jungle paths into government-controlled areas of Batticaloa District to the south of Vaharai.

UNHCR estimates that some 70,000 people have been killed and 465,000 displaced by the more than two decade-long conflict, including nearly 205,000 uprooted since fighting erupted anew in April 2006 despite a ceasefire signed in 2002.

Before today's exodus, 9,500 people were estimated to still remain in Vaharai, which had seen months of heavy fighting. Humanitarian access has been limited since last October, with only one humanitarian convoy able to deliver aid in late November.

“Our staff are out in the field trying to verify the numbers fleeing and their exact location, and to start arranging assistance,” Mr. Redmond said. “UNHCR is very concerned about the safety of any civilians remaining in Vaharai, as well as those in other areas across **Sri Lanka**'s conflict-riddled north and east.”

Since December, UNHCR and its partners have been working with local authorities to set up emergency sites to host the new arrivals so that schools which were initially sheltering the displaced can re-open in a matter of weeks. In late December, the agency distributed basic household items to over 5,000 families from Vaharai.

“We have more stocks to help the latest arrivals,” Mr. Redmond noted. “Over the last four months, we have distributed over 500,000 basic household items (everything from toothbrushes to mosquito nets to sarongs and saris) to displaced people and host families.”