

## NEWS

# UN officials expelled by Sri Lanka

CHIEF of Communications for UNICEF in Sri Lanka, James Elder's visa to continue to remain in Sri Lanka was refused earlier this month by Sri Lanka's Department of Immigration without giving any reasons.

News of Elder's eviction was followed by news of another senior UN diplomat expelled from Sri Lanka in July for providing details to the international community of mass killings of civilians during the final battles against the Tamil Tigers, also emerged.

It is widely believed that Elder is being expelled for recent remarks about the plight of refugees living in government-controlled camps in the north of the country.

Elder called for aid groups to have unfettered access to the camps, to bring in medical aid and supplies.

"It's important to remember these people have arrived in camps in the worst possible state," he said.

"They are hungry and sick, and many still have untended wounds from the war." And added he'd seen "babies with shrapnel wounds, gunshot injuries and blast wounds" during Sri Lanka's final push against the LTTE.

Elder was also quoted in the media saying the about 270,000 displaced people were suffering hardship due to heavy flooding in the camps after heavy rain in some areas of Vavuniya district in recent weeks.

However, Palitha Kohona, permanent secretary at the Sri Lankan ministry of foreign affairs, told the BBC Elder had issued statements "which were not exactly based on facts, which were not researched, which were essentially reflective of the LTTE [Tamil Tigers] perspective.

"He was doing propaganda, in our view, in support of the LTTE," Kohona was quoted by BBC as saying.

Kohona's comments have raised fears about the safety of Elder and his family in a country where ethnic tensions remain high just months after the end of a long-running civil war, reported the Age newspaper.

According to the newspaper, Elder has received intimidating phone messages after it was announced that his visa would be cancelled on September 21.

Even if the Sri Lankan Government reverses its decision to expel Elder, Kohona's comments appear to make his position in Sri Lanka untenable, the Age added.

Elder, who holds an Australian passport, had been working for

UNICEF in Sri Lanka since July 2008 and had a residency visa valid until 2010.

Reacting to the news of Elders' eviction, U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters: "The secretary-general strongly regrets the decision of the Sri Lankan government to expel Mr. James Elder, spokesman for UNICEF in Sri Lanka"

"The United Nations is working impartially to assist the people of Sri Lanka, and the Government should be supporting and co-operating with its efforts," Haq said adding UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon would raise the issue with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse "at the earliest opportunity."

The UNICEF reacting to Sri Lanka's actions, in a statement said it was extremely 'concerned and disappointed' with the Sri Lankan government's decision.

'Through Mr Elder, Unicef has consistently spoken out against the suffering of children on both sides of the intense hostilities earlier this year and called for their protection. Unicef unequivocally rejects any allegation of bias,' Unicef chief executive Ann Veneman said in a statement released in New York.

'Unicef has always upheld the principle of impartial advocacy and communication on behalf of children as a fundamental part of its global mandate,' she said.

'Unicef will continue to uphold its mandate in Sri Lanka, and elsewhere, to advocate and speak out on behalf of vulnerable children and women,' the statement added.

Meanwhile, the Guardian newspaper in Britain Saturday, September 12, reported Peter Mackay, another Australian citizen, was given two weeks to leave the country in July this for providing detailed rebuttals of Sri Lankan government's "wartime propaganda."

The diplomat was seen as a legal timebomb by the Sri Lankan government as he could personally take the stand and testify that the army shelled non-combatants - action considered to be a war crime under international law, the paper said.

"Mackay, a field operative who worked for Unops - the technical arm of the UN - was a less familiar face to the media. But he played a key role in keeping the outside world informed about the number of civilians killed in the final months of the war - deaths that Sri Lanka was keen to play down," The Guardian reported.

Mackay collected high-resolution satellite images showing



UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has recently criticised Sri Lanka for throwing out a number of UN officials, but his organisation is still unable to agree on what (or whether) action ought to be taken

that the number of people trapped on beaches where the Tigers made their last stand was far higher than that claimed by the government.

The data showed that not only were more people in danger than the government admitted, but that the food and medicine sent to the "no fire zone" were inadequate.

Mackay was also in touch with local staff and put together briefings, using eyewitness reports of the war, which led the UN to warn of a "bloodbath" in the final weeks of fighting.

Mackay's experience and knowledge of LTTE-held territory made him the ideal UN candidate to record how the war was being fought, the paper said.

"He was stranded behind Tamil Tiger lines on a mission to rescue 100 local staff and their families and was repeatedly bombed for 10 days in January, despite desperate calls to army commanders by his superiors imploring them to stop firing," the paper reported.

His presence, however, attracted the attention of Sri Lanka's military. In a letter sent in late July, the authorities gave him two weeks to pack up, saying that his "adverse activities had come to the notice of the intelligence services".

A senior UN source confirmed that Mackay had been asked to leave, adding that "the issue was taken up through diplomatic channels with the government, but their decision remained unchanged".

The visas of at least 10 foreign workers of non-governmental organisations have been cancelled or not extended over allegations of bias in favour of the Tamil Tigers. Meanwhile, the UN says it is continuing to pressure Sri Lanka over allegations of human rights violations.

## New UN envoy amidst concern over detentions

A SENIOR political official of the United Nations arrived in Sri Lanka to amidst international concern over human rights violations committed by Sri Lanka during its war against the Tamil Tigers and the continued detention of tens of thousands of Tamils in barbed wired camps.

"We are very concerned about the pace of progress," Pascoe said Monday, September 16 at the United Nations as he prepared to travel to Sri Lanka at the request of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the U.N. News Service said.

"The secretary-general was there (in Sri Lanka) and a series of commitments was made ... including on the movement of people out of camps and including an eventual political process and some kind of accountability mechanism."

Pascoe said he will raise the issue of resettling displaced Tamils in Sri Lankan camps on his visit to the island nation.

About 300,000 Tamils, displaced from their homes during the Sri Lankan military's campaign against the Tamil Tigers, have been housed in camps with poor facilities since May when the military declared victory over the Tamil Tigers.

"We are very concerned about the pace of progress," Pascoe said. "We're particularly concerned about the [refugees]."

The United Nations, its agencies and other international groups have been critical of the Sri Lankan government's slow progress in resettling the displaced people who are reportedly facing a humanitarian crisis in the camps. Only a few thousand of them have returned to their homes.

Sri Lanka says its plan to return refugees to their homes by December depends on the clearing of mines from former conflict zones and establishing security in the north. Rains last month flooded tents and caused temporary sewage systems to overflow in the camps, prompting calls from the U.S. and the UN for the swift release of the estimated 300,000 displaced people before the monsoon season begins in the next couple of months.

The UN can ask Sri Lanka to speed up the process, "but we have to complete de-mining first in these areas," U.L.M. Haldeen, secretary in the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services said, responding to UN calls.

Pascoe said he also planned to discuss the continued detention of two U.N. staff members and the Sri Lanka's decision to expel U.N. children's agency spokesman James Elder. Pascoe plans to spend several days in Sri Lanka, visiting refugee camps and meeting Rajapakse.