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## Concerns of Humanitarian Crisis in Sri Lanka

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**By John Pontifex:** **Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need has stepped in to help as a humanitarian crisis grips Sri Lanka's northerly Jaffna province.**

The peninsula's Catholic bishop put out an appeal to the charity for suffering Christians, describing his people as living in an "open prison", lacking virtually all contact with the outside world.

In comments made during an interview with ACN, Dr Thomas Savundaranayagam of Jaffna went on to say that the Catholic community was "deeply depressed and discouraged" by the continuing silence over the fate of 34-year-old Jaffna priest Fr Jim Brown, whom he now presumed was dead.

The priest disappeared at the end of the summer after his church was targeted by Government forces who suspected that rebel forces had infiltrated the crowds taking refuge there.

In the face of renewed conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Colombo-based Sri Lankan government has effectively placed Jaffna peninsula under quarantine, blocking off communications by land, air and sea.

The blockade – which crucially includes a road-block on the A9 'Elephant Pass' linking Jaffna to the rest of Sri Lanka – has plunged the peninsula into crisis with a dire shortage of food, electricity for only nine hours per day and spiralling unemployment.

Bishop Savundaranayagam pleaded with the Government to ease the blockade and now comes news that President Mahinda Rajapakse's administration has sent ships with emergency rations of rice, sugar and flour.

But in the ACN interview, Bishop Thomas denounced the aid relief as "inadequate" and in response the charity has agreed an emergency aid package of €20,000 (£13,400). The bishop expressed outrage at the government's insistence on charging the people to receive the rations rather than distributing them free.

The ACN aid will enable the Church to buy rations on behalf of people unable to afford it. The bishop said that many essential needs were not being met by the government's relief effort including supplies of coconut oil for cooking, baby food and petrol.

Stressing the regime's apparent disregard for the people's suffering, Bishop Savundaranayagam said: "The government has banned access to many things in Jaffna for fear of them getting into the hands of the LTTE.

"They seem to forget that there are people here in Jaffna – not just Tamil Tigers."

He said the ACN aid would add to the Church's existing emergency aid relief in which up to 7,000 people were benefiting thanks to a grant from Catholic humanitarian organisation Caritas.

He went on to say that rebuilding work following the tsunami had ground to a halt because as part of its blockade, the government had stopped the transport of building materials into the peninsula.