

NEWS

Continuing misery of Sri Lanka's camps



Tamil civilians interred in Sri Lanka's camps continue to suffer from lack of sanitation and overcrowding even as water dumps onto unstable areas with flimsy shelters, with more rain expected soon

ALMOST 4 months since the end of the war, little progress has been made at the camps that hold nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians which have been described as "shocking and disturbing", recent press reports said.

New mobile phone footage of conditions in the Manik Farm camp in Vavuniya shows ill people lying on mud floors with intravenous drips in their arms and no hospital beds in sight.

The footage was apparently recorded two weeks ago and provided to Channel 4 news by a group called War without Witness.

"Patients on intravenous drips lying on mud floors, a man so weak he is unable to brush the flies from his face," Channel 4 said in its broadcast, adding, "[t]he concern now is that when the monsoon rain season begins, the camp will be flooded."

One third of all children under 5 in the camps have malnutrition and 8% of those have it in its acute form, the report said.

"It is a horrendous place to be for anyone" James Elder, the UNICEF spokesman, told Channel 4. He has since been told to leave Sri Lanka by the government, which has accused him of spreading propaganda in support of the Tigers.

Aid workers made fresh plea for the government to take action due to the already poor conditions in the camps and mounting fear of worsening conditions in the coming monsoon season.

Recent floods from last month have already destroyed two thousand settlements and have further worsened sanitation conditions, submerging toilets and contaminating water.

The impending monsoon season, due in October, will be highly destructive to the weak infrastructure of the camps, aid workers say.

"A potential crisis could brew there if the rains come through and those camps are still as congested as they are [now]," a Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD) official who visited one of the IDP camps recently told the BBC.

"Nothing has changed over the last three months for the people that are living in the camps. They are overcrowded with poor sanitary conditions and inadequate health care," CAFOD's head of international program said.

"The people have basic food and supplies but many remain traumatised and due to restricted movement are still separated from their families causing even more

distress."

Sri Lanka's Resettlement Minister Rishard Bathurdeen has blamed UN agencies for what he calls a poorly constructed drainage system that collapsed during the floods.

But Human Rights Watch said the government must take "full responsibility" for the squalid conditions.

The New York-based group urged Colombo to release inmates to live with their families and friends, a demand consistently rejected by authorities.

"Locking families up in squalid conditions and then blaming aid agencies for their plight is downright shameful," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

"This is illegal, dangerous, and inhumane," he said, adding the floods had "heightened the risk of outbreak of disease".

The government has severely restricted access to the camps and does not allow journalists to visit the area on their own.

Although the government originally promised to resettle 80% of the detainees by the end of the year, there is concern that seems to have been delayed indefinitely now.

United Nations spokesman in Colombo, Gordon Weiss, says they are not seeing enough progress in return of the displaced Tamils to their homes.

"We want to be clear that we expect people will be allowed to return home very soon and much faster than is taking place at the moment," he said.

"We want to understand how people are being screened, because there are a lot of people inside these camps who clearly present no appreciable security risk to the government, lots of women with young families, lots of young children, separated and orphaned children, people who are ill."

U.N. spokesman Weiss says it is not possible to indefinitely fund the camps, which are being run with assistance from the UN and other international donors.

"There needs to be a degree of clarity about how this money is being spent, what it is being spent for, in other words there needs to be a conclusion because the involvement of the United Nations in these camps is on the understanding that the people will not be there for a long time," he said.

Other agencies echo this concern. "At the moment this process [of returning the displaced] is painfully slow. The Sri Lanka government must make good its

commitment by making a start and allowing the most vulnerable groups to return home" said the CAFOD official.

The camps fail to meet international standards on basic access to food, water and shelter. Overcrowding and lack of freedom to movement heightens any risk of disease and violence within the camps.

Outbreaks of diseases such as Hepatitis A, chicken pox and skin ailments are prevalent and concern that cholera may develop, an earlier report by Aljazeera said.

Aid agencies sounded the alarm to the UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator even before the war was over, that "current conditions in Menik farm are not only a violation of IDP's fundamental rights to freedom of movement, education and livelihoods, they are also failing to adequately fulfil rights on basic access to food, shelter and water," Aljazeera said.

Most of the shelters hold twice the number of people recommended under international standards.

Over 220,000 people are held in overcrowded and poor sanitary conditions in the six-zones of the Manik Farm camp, while minimum international standards - outlined by the Sphere Project - would allow for a maximum of 140,000 people in the cramped space, the report said.

Further, with nearly four hundred babies born every month in the Manik Farm camp, the people there are in need of considerable assistance and care, which they are not getting.

Sarvodaya leader Dr A. T. Ariyaratna presented the statistics when he was making a commemorative address in honour of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, at the SEDEC centre in Colombo.

Mr. Ariyaratna said that Sarvodaya movement was able to put together and supply some 800 cots for the infants in a short period of time, although the initial requirement was 400 cots at the request of the health authorities at the Menik Farm.

"If Mother Theresa were alive today, she would have rushed to the IDP camps in Vavuniyaa to help the inmates there," he said.

BBC: UN patience wears thin

TamilNet

THE United Nations says it cannot continue to indefinitely fund the sprawling, overcrowded and militarized camp in which Sri Lanka has interned hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians.

Speaking to the BBC, the UN's Sri Lanka chief, Neil Buhne, said people should be allowed to leave the barbed wire-ringed Manik Farm camp.

Mr Buhne also criticised Sri Lanka's denial of access for the International Red Cross to 10,000 Tamils whom the government calls LTTE suspects.

Meanwhile the UN says it is extremely concerned for two staff members arrested by Sri Lankan authorities in June, being amid reports they were mistreated during the early days of their detention. Since the war ended in May, the Sri Lankan authorities have refused to let anyone leave this vast camp apart from some young children, elderly people and priests. Some priests have reportedly refused to leave whilst the remaining people are not free to go.

UN agencies help fund and run the camps but there are signs the UN is running out of patience, the BBC reported Friday.

"The best solution is obviously that as many people leave as soon as possible," the UN's Sri Lanka chief, Neil Buhne, told the BBC. "And that the site can become - for the people who have no place else to go - that it becomes an open site."

International rights groups have said holding the civilians is an illegal form of collective punishment and urged the government to allow them to leave to live with relatives, friends or host families in the area.

The Sri Lankan government says it cannot release the civilians until it finishes screening them

for potential LTTE fighters, and until land mines are cleared from their villages in the north.

But rights workers told the Associated Press the screening process has dragged on longer than expected.

Also Friday, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said it is being denied access to the rehabilitation centers where surrendered LTTE cadres and those the government accuses of being LTTE supporters are held.

The spokeswoman for the ICRC in Colombo, Sarasi Wijeratne confirmed the barring of access to the Daily Mirror Friday, though other aid workers say this actually began several weeks ago. UN's Sri Lanka chief Neil Buhne criticism of the ICRC's being barred comes amid persistent reports of abductions, torture and summary executions in the prison camps and Vavuniya residents' accounts of bodies being buried in cluster graves in the region.

Earlier this week the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, criticised the Sri Lankan government's decision to expel the UN children's agency spokesman in the country.

UNICEF spokesman James Elder regularly spoke to the media on the plight of children caught up in the conflict, but Sri Lanka spokesperson told BBC "James Elder's visa has been cancelled over his propaganda in support of the Tigers."

Mr Ban's office said in a statement: "The secretary-general strongly regrets the decision of the Sri Lankan government to expel Mr Elder."

"The UN chief "expresses his full confidence in the work of the United Nations in Sri Lanka, which includes making public statements when necessary in an effort to save lives and prevent grave humanitarian problems".