

NEWS

Time running out for displaced

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EVERYWHERE in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo, posters featuring smiling soldiers holding rocket launchers and machine guns celebrate the recent end to the nation's 26-year civil war.

But in the government-run camps that still house more than 250,000 ethnic Tamils displaced by the war's fighting, the mood is far from celebratory.

In late August, heavy rains at the largest camp, Manik, flooded tents and led to unsanitary conditions. According to aid worker K Thampu, "The situation was heart-breaking. Tents were flooded and mothers, desperate to keep their children dry during the night, took chairs and tables from school facilities for them to sleep on."

Rains also caused toilets to flood, with worms covering large swaths of ground near latrines, says Thampu.

At stake, according to local experts, is not only the immediate welfare of camp residents, but chances for long-lasting peace in Sri Lanka.

Most of the internally displaced people (IDPs) have been living in the camps since May, when they fled the intense fighting that marked the final battle between government forces and the insurgent group known as the Tamil Tigers.

Publicly, the Sri Lankan government has committed to returning IDPs to their homes by November of this year, and several thousand people have been released from camps to live with relatives.

But the government under President Mahinda Rajapaksa also maintains that others must remain in camps until the area around their former homes is cleared of mines. At the same time, government representatives are slowly screening camp residents to identify former combatants.

Aid workers and local experts agree that the government must move quickly, for several reasons.

The most urgent among them is monsoon season, which starts at the end of September and will only exacerbate the already difficult camp conditions.

More tents and toilets will flood, increasing the risk of communicable and mosquito-borne diseases.

"We saw how bad things got after the recent rains, which only lasted 3 or 4 days," says Thampu, who works for the Baltimore-based humanitarian organization Lutheran World Relief. "Imagine

how bad they will get once the monsoons are upon us."

In addition to the rains, longstanding tensions between Tamils and the Sinhalese-led government remain, even if the armed insurgency has been defeated.

Many worry that if the government does not act quickly to return people to their homes, it will lead to new problems in northern Sri Lanka.

Thampu says that many teenagers in the camps are already frustrated. "Young people have told me, 'We have no freedom to talk, no protection, no education, no recreation and no employment! Everything looks like hell in our life. What do we have to live for?'"

Despite living in a warzone, many teenagers were able to pass the university entrance exams. But now they cannot leave the camps to begin their studies.

Thampu adds, "Victory has been declared, but what does that mean for them? It is important to give them a new start in life."

According to T Thevathas, another aid worker in Manik Camp, "Peace and security in the north is the most important thing to consider. People have been waiting 30 years for this, but IDPs in the camps feel no security and have no peace of mind despite the government's victory."

Thevathas notes that for real advances to be made in the north, it is crucial for Tamils in the camp to feel that the national government is working on their behalf.

"At this point," he says, "IDPs have placed all their hopes for return on local governments and the international community."

Bernard Jaspers Failer, of the aid organization ZOA Refugee Care, acknowledges that the Sri Lankan government has genuine security concerns. "But," he is quick to add, "those have to be balanced with the fact that the longer people remain in camps, new frustrations are being generated which will have long-term impacts on society."

The Sri Lankan government has strictly regulated access to the camps. But those organizations and governmental representatives who have been able to visit have expressed concern over the conditions. Human Rights Watch, the New York-based rights organization, has said that the government "is threatening [IDPs'] health and even their lives by keeping them there during the rainy season floods."



Civilians taken out of the main camps in Vavuniya and ostensibly returned home are being held in smaller detention centres in schools and temples, with the freedom of movement still curtailed

U.S. officials have also put pressure on the Sri Lankan government to allow camp residents to return home.

In comments made on Aug. 19, Eric Schwartz, assistant secretary for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the State Department, said the "involuntary confinement is especially a source of concern given the recent rains and given the coming of the monsoon season, and it makes it all the more important that release from confinement be an issue that friends of Sri Lanka continue to raise."

In an effort to expedite the process, on July 27, the U.S. announced an additional \$8 mil-

lion in aid to assist in the return of IDPs to their homes in northern Sri Lanka. With the monsoon season rapidly approaching, and frustration levels on the rise within the camps, local experts agree that time is a critical factor.

For Thampu, it is "a situation where a successful return process would be a giant step towards long-lasting peace. But if these people who were forced from their homes are forced to stay in camps, it could result in increased tensions for the down the road."

While the Sri Lankan government has made moves to release some of the most vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly and disabled, aid workers and the U.S.

government alike agree that the return process must be accelerated.

For the people in the camps, their return home will mark an end to war in Sri Lanka. And, as T Thevathas notes, "It will finally provide relief from the fears they endured during war and continue to feel in the camps today."

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'From one prison to another'

TamilNet

UNDER international pressure as the monsoon looms, the Sri Lankan government is hastily engaged in relocating some of the displaced Tamils being held in militarised internment camps in Vavuniya.

However, the inmates are being moved from Vavuniya's barbed-wire ringed camps to similar overcrowded enclosures without facilities in other districts, sources in Jaffna said.

Moreover these camps are also located in low-lying terrain in the path of oncoming floods, NGO workers say. "There is no resettlement. This is like being sent from one prison to another prison," Mavai Senathiraja, a parliamentarian from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) said.

On Friday September 18 the UN's political chief Lynn Pascoe said the government had not lived up to its pledges on resettlement to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in May.

"We have not seen the progress we expected from that agreement," he said of a deal between Colombo and Ban in May, just after the government declared the decades-long war

was over.

Just over one thousand people were brought from Vavuniya camps to Raamavil detention camps in Kachchaai in Thenmaraadchi Friday and these already crowded camps are facing severe shortage of space, NGO officials who visited the camps said.

The government appears to be determined to detain the IDPs indefinitely in the camps, civil society sources in Jaffna said.

Senathiraja told the Associated Press 6,000 of those promised release last week by the government were from his constituency in northern Jaffna, but only 580 arrived in the area and all of them were immediately sent to another camp, where they continue to be detained. In the eastern districts of Ampara and Trincomalee, many returning refugees were being held in schools that have been turned into makeshift camps, he also said.

Despite the government's removal of people from Vavuniya ostensibly being in response to international concerns over the imminent monsoon, the camps in Thenmaraadchi too are directly at

risk of severe flooding.

These camps have also been erected in low lying terrain, face the risk heavy flooding and the situation is further worsened by the earthen dams constructed in these areas by Sri Lanka Army (SLA) in the past, NGO workers said.

Government officials are actively engaged in identifying persons from Jaffna district among the IDPs detained in Vavuniya camps to be located in Jaffna camps.

Though it is said that the existing camps in Jaffna are to be extended there are no signs of extension of camp facilities taking place.

Situation in the detention camps is feared to grow worse as they already lack basic facilities while thousand more are to be herded into these camps, NGO representatives expressed concern.

"Clearly, the government is making a lot of effort, but we have some strong concerns -- particularly the 'closed' nature of the camps," UN's Political chief Pascoe was quoted by AFP as saying after touring camps where Tamil civilians are held in what international human rights groups say are prison-like conditions.