

NEWS

Displaced between military and monsoon - AI

A QUARTER of a million Sri Lankans being held in de facto detention camps are facing a humanitarian disaster as monsoon rains threaten to flood camps, said Amnesty International in a press release.

For months, the Sri Lankan government authorities have failed to deliver basic services to camps set up in the Vavuniya District in the north-east that were created following conflict in the area, the human rights group said.

These camps remain overcrowded and lack basic sanitation facilities. As a result, during heavy rains in September, rivers of water cascaded through tents and forced camp residents to wade through overflowing sewage, the release noted.

"People living in these camps are desperate to leave," said Amnesty International's Sri Lanka expert, Yolanda Foster, who is in contact with relatives of some camp residents. "The government must ensure that the displaced are treated with dignity."

A recent escapee from Chettikulam camp reported to Amnesty International that some women had been forced to give birth in front of strangers without privacy.

"Medical staff are only available in the camps 9 to 5," the escapee said. "People start waiting in line for medical assistance from early morning...how can you expect a lady who is pregnant to stand in a line for hours? If the war has ended, why doesn't the government let these people out?"

"The provision of protection, assistance and return is not an act of charity but a basic right," said Foster.

"They have a right to protection and must be consulted on whether they wish to return to their homes or resettle."

Since the war ended in May 2009, thousands of people detained in camps have been subjected to 'screening' processes by the security forces, the release notes.

While screenings are said to ensure that detainees are not members of the Liberation Tigers, the processes should follow proper procedures and not be used as an excuse for collective punishment, Amnesty said.

Approximately 10,000 detainees that have been determined ex-LTTE combatants are held in separate detention facilities.

Amnesty has previously raised concerns about the lack of independent monitoring and lack

of accountability for these screening processes.

Despite the government's widely publicized accounts of detainee releases, Amnesty has received reports that many were merely transferred to other camps in the area where they may be subjected to rescreening by local authorities.

Amnesty has also received reports that the military is blocking release attempts by the civilian administration, it said.

The Sri Lankan government must involve the displaced themselves in plans for return or resettlement, Amnesty said.

Authorities must also facilitate the assistance of independent humanitarian organizations in this regard, in order to effectively deal with the humanitarian disaster the camps are facing.

"Freedom of movement is now critical," said Foster. "The international community and the government of Sri Lanka can no longer ignore the voices of camp detainees to be allowed to leave."

According to government figures, the fighting between the Sri Lankan Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam displaced over 409,000 people, the Amnesty report said. At least 280,000 were displaced from areas previously under LTTE control.

The displaced people, including at least 50,000 children, are being accommodated in 41 camps spread over four districts. The majority of the displaced are in Vavuniya District where Manik Farm is the biggest camp.

When United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon visited some of the camps in May, he said: "I have travelled around the world and visited similar places, but this is by far the most appalling scene I have seen."

While some progress had been made on providing basic needs, much still needs to be done on the right to health, food, water, family reunion and access to relatives.

Amnesty International continues to call on the government of Sri Lanka to end restrictions on liberty and freedom of movement; ensure that camps are of a truly civilian nature and administered by civilian authorities, rather than under military supervision; and give immediate and full access to national and international organizations and observers, including aid agencies, in order to monitor the situation and provide a safeguard against human rights violations.



Drainage systems in the camps across Vavuniya have already proved insufficient during 3 days of rain in August. The monsoons are expected to be much worse, but there are no plans to shut down the camps

Camps not ready for monsoons - HRW

THE lives of hundreds of thousands of Tamils held in internment camps are in "serious danger" from the imminent rainy season and a looming threat of disease, a human rights group has warned.

Nearly 300,000 Tamils were forced into the military-run camps after the final months of the government's war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) earlier this year.

With monsoon season approaching, New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has called on the Sri Lankan government to immediately release the refugees.

It warned that already poor conditions in the camps were deteriorating, and heavy rains could flood the overcrowded and low-lying areas.

"With all these people penned up unnecessarily in terrible conditions, the situation in these camps is getting tense and ugly," Brad Adams, HRW's Asia director, told Al Jazeera.

"If they aren't out of there before the monsoons hit, their lives and health will be in serious danger."

HRW called on donors such as Japan, the US, and the EU to step up pressure on Sri Lanka over the issue, echoing an earlier call by Amnesty International, which also urged the government to clear the camps.

But a Sri Lankan official rejected the claim. Rajiva Wijesinha, a spokesman for the government, told Al Jazeera that the camps were "ready to face the monsoon".

The government says it is detaining Tamils in the camps so that they can be screened to weed out former Tamil Tiger fighters.

It had promised to release and relocate 80 per cent of them by the end of the year, but nearly five months after the war ended, around 255,000 remain held in the camps.

Rains in mid-August caused serious flooding, destroying tents and other shelter, making cooking impossible for many, and causing roads to collapse, preventing the delivery of crucial aid such as drinking water.

Water also flooded latrine pits, causing raw sewage to flow among the tents. Since then, conditions have further deteriorated, HRW said.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, Rajiva Wijesinha, the secretary of the Sri Lanka's ministry of disaster management and human rights, admitted there had been problems with toilets and drainage and floods in August.

But he blamed the UN for the situation, accusing its agencies of not fulfilling promises to upgrade or repair facilities and doing "very shoddy" work in the camps.

Wijesinha said that there was a need for what he called "decongestion" of the camps, adding: "We have asked for assistance on sending people away to some of the districts they had originally come from, and we believe this is going on reasonably well ... perhaps much better than Human Rights Watch understands."

He repeated the government's position that it is trying to release the detained Tamils, but said the process had been slow because they need to be screened for rebel ties, and their villages in the former battle zone remain heavily mined.

Responding to Wijesinha's assertions, Anna Neistat, a senior

researcher with HRW, told Al Jazeera she did not think there was "any reason to believe that the camps are ready" to cope with the onset of the monsoon.

"The Sri Lankan government has been saying so many different things over the last month, including, for example, that people will be released, people will be resettled, that the conditions are up to international standards, none of that has so far proven to be true," she said.

According to the UN, by the end of September the government continued to hold 255,551 displaced persons in the military-run camps and hospitals, the majority of them in a large complex of camps called Menik Farm.

Rights groups say the screening of refugees is an excuse for keeping thousands of Tamils detained.

Sri Lanka says more than 22,000 people have been resettled from the camps, and it hopes to send everyone home by the end of January. According to the UN however, the government had released fewer than 15,000 as of September 28.

HRW said on several occasions the government had claimed that it had allowed thousands detained in Menik Farm to return home, only to transfer them to other camps or so-called temporary "way stations".

"While the government has the right to screen the displaced persons for security reasons, the process has turned into a ruse to hold as many Tamils for as long as possible in the camps," Asia Director Brad Adams said.

"The government's untruthful statements and promises should not fool anybody anymore."