

NEWS

'There will be loss of life' – UK

THE "freedom of movement is critical if a humanitarian crisis is to be averted", warned Mike Foster, British Minister for International Development, as he concluded a two-day tour of IDP camps in Northern Sri Lanka.

He gave a stark warning regarding the forthcoming monsoon saying that "the tents are basically disintegrating."

"Disease, if it takes hold, is going to spread rapidly. Without doubt there will a loss of life."

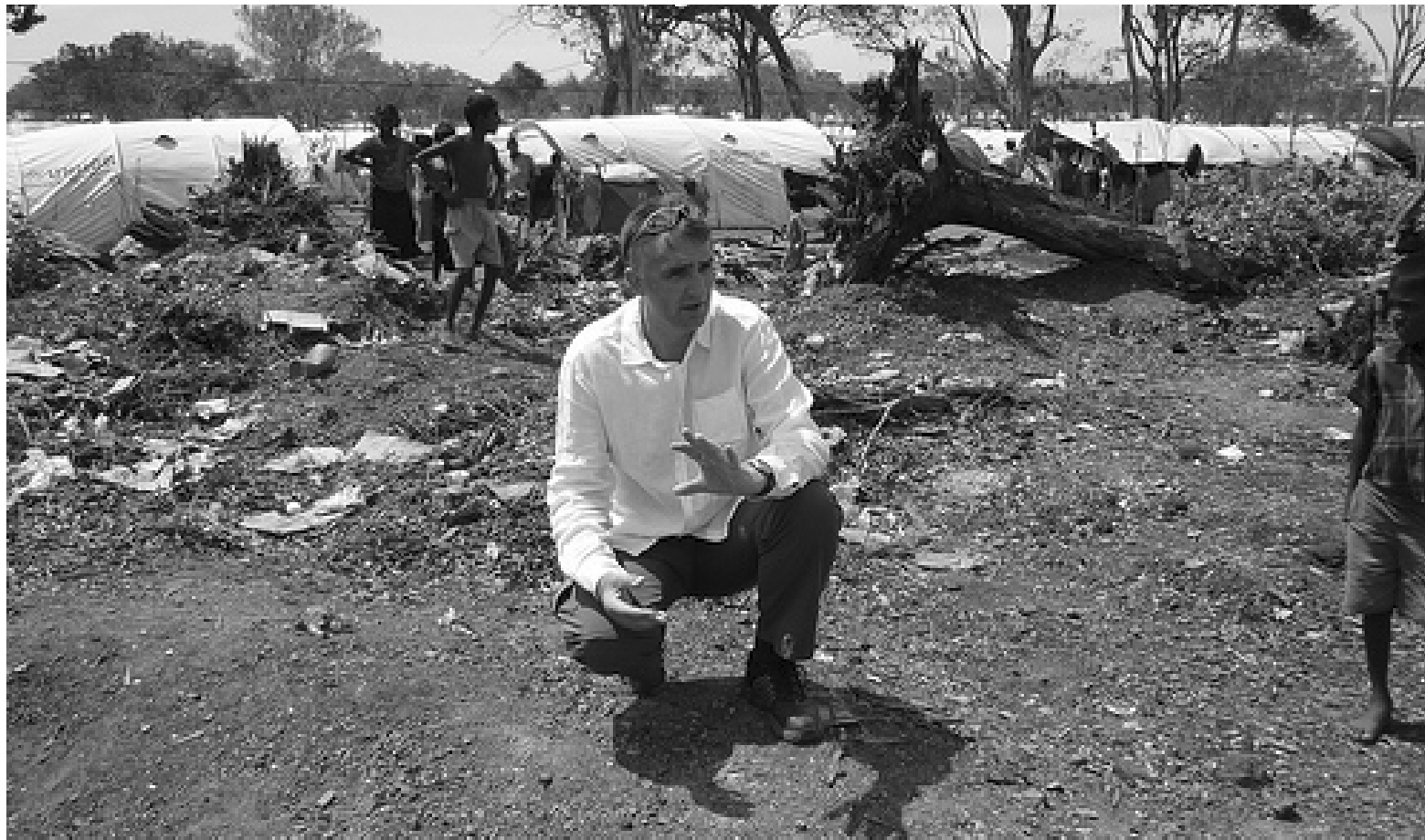
The British minister also "made clear that UK funding could not support people simply being transferred from existing 'closed' camps – which detain civilians for long periods of time – to new closed camps," said a statement by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

"Freedom of movement has to be allowed now," it said.

Heavy rain in September saw severe flooding, as water ran through tents and camp IDPs had to wade through overflowing sewage. With the October monsoon rapidly approaching, dozens of international organisations have expressed their concerns regarding the ability of the camps to cope with the downpours.

Britain confirmed that it was holding more than £4.8 million in aid money "ready to provide further support to help the Sri Lankan Government meet its welcome commitment to release the majority of civilians from the camps before the end of the year".

The BBC was also allowed access into the camps with Mr



British Minister Mike Foster visited the camps with a media crew and saw for himself the conditions in which the Tamil civilians live

Foster, where they managed to speak to some of the refugees being forcibly detained there.

On seeing a foreign reporter enter the camp, many women flocked to the vehicle to tell their story, press reports said. One told of how she was displaced 15

times in 3 years and was now sharing a tent with 24 people, the BBC reported. "There is no water to drink. There is no water to bathe. We are going to die here," pleaded another camp inmate.

Foster announced that the UK would no longer provide funding

to the camps after the monsoon, unless for "life-saving emergency interventions".

"Our view is that those camps should not be permanent, should be a temporary fixture, and if we continue to fund day-to-day relief work then there is no incentive for

the government to allow people to leave," Foster said.

"There really is no reason why they can't return. If the gates are opened up, they can be the judge of whether it's safe or not to go home," continued Foster. "That should be a choice for them."

No more funding for camps - UK

BRITAIN has announced that it will withdraw all but emergency funding for camps in Sri Lanka.

The news comes after the British Minister for International Development, Mike Foster, visited the detention camps in Northern Sri Lanka, and criticised the way they were run.

More than 280,000 Tamil civilians are held in about six camps across northern Sri Lanka. They were all displaced by the last stages of the war, and despite numerous promises to release at least 80% within 6 months, the Sri Lankan government has made little efforts to do so. Even the few thousand who have been released are sent on to other camps, and not to their homes, according to reports from the island.

\$195 million has already been donated by foreign countries, almost all of which has been spent by the Government on the camps. However, they still need a further \$225 million in order to run them, a sum which they cannot afford without any international assistance, press reports said.

"This has always been one of

the few effective tools that Western countries could use to influence the Government's conduct in the latter stages of the war and its aftermath," said Jeremy Page, South Asia correspondent for the Times.

"The question that needs to be asked — if only to avoid crises such as this one — is why it took so long to use it."

Initially, as the Sri Lankan Government proposed setting up the camps in February, the Department for International Development (DfID) in Britain released a statement saying, "There is no UK government money going into the camps", whilst also commenting "prolonging the displacement of this vulnerable group of people is not in anyone's interests".

This position rapidly changed though, as the entire Vanni population was herded into these camps. The British Government then began to provide millions of pounds in funding through the UN and NGO's, raised through British tax payers money.

DfID still refuses to use the terms "detention centres" of

"concentration camps", as alleged by many other activists and politicians, instead referring to them as "camps where civilians are detained".

Now, the UK has announced that once the monsoon is over, it will fund only "life-saving emergency interventions".

"That's increasingly going to be the attitude not just of us, but of other donors as well," Minister Mike Foster reportedly said.

"We are drawing up a fresh appeal to meet our running costs next year that will include funds for livelihood support and resettlement projects," Minister of Disaster Management Mahinda Samarasinghe told a meeting attended by representatives of the Sri Lankan government, various UN agencies, the Red Cross and diplomatic officials in the capital Colombo.

The Minister reiterated that he hoped to raise "much, much more than the \$225 million raised this year".

More than 250,000 Tamil civilians remain trapped in these camps, as the October monsoon rapidly approaches.

US: Tamils should move freely

THE United States of America called upon Sri Lanka to allow displaced Tamil stuck in camps to be able to move freely. A statement by the US State Department "emphasized the importance of the government allowing freedom of movement for IDPs".

"The U.S. has stressed to the government that to achieve a lasting peace, it must promote justice and political reconciliation for all parties and dialogue with all parties, including Tamils inside and outside Sri Lanka, on new mechanisms for devolving power," said a statement from the US State Department.

This follows Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake meeting with "16 Sri Lankan-American community representatives", in order to discuss the political and humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka at the headquarters of the State Department.

The "Sri Lankan-American" delegates that met with Blake were a group that were specially prepared and selected by the Sri

Lankan Embassy in the US. Most of the group consisted of leading Sinhalese figures from the community.

The embassy also enlisted the services of renowned Washington-based public lobbying firm, Patton Boggs, in order to prepare the group for this meeting.

"The United States has provided over \$56 million in humanitarian assistance in 2009, including \$6.6 million in demining assistance," but that "much remains to be done," Blake also noted.

Blake also "underscored the importance of political reconciliation" while recommending that "Sri Lankan Americans seek opportunities to channel their resources and expertise toward supporting national reconciliation".

"The government must also seek to improve human rights and accountability," he said.

By specifically mentioning "Tamils inside and outside Sri Lanka", the US indicated that it believes the Tamil diaspora play a crucial part in bringing about peace to the island, said analysts.