

## NEWS

# Colombo bereft of excuses on internees – Crisis Group

TamilNet

ANDREW Strohlein, International Crisis Group's Communications Director, during his testimony to the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights on the situation in Sri Lanka Thursday, noted the poor and deteriorating conditions in the internment camps where more than 264,000 Tamils are being held by Colombo.

"The worst kind of duplicity was seen just a few weeks ago, when the [Sri Lanka] government announced it had released 10,000 displaced persons. In fact, we know at least 3,300 people had been moved from an internment camp to another detention facility," he said.

"Sri Lankan government has run out of excuses for continuing to keep these hundreds of thousands of innocent people prisoner," he added.

## Full text of his testimony:

Thank you, Madam Chair, for offering Crisis Group the opportunity to present our assessment of the situation in Sri Lanka today.

Since the end of the war and the defeat of the terrorist Tamil Tigers, the government of Sri Lanka has been imprisoning without charge over a quarter of a million ethnic Tamils displaced by the conflict. The state has locked them in internment camps in the north of the country. The camps are surrounded by barbed wire, and as an incident just this past weekend in Vavuniya demonstrates, the Sri Lankan army will shoot at anyone who tries to escape.

Such restrictions on freedom in the absence of due process are a violation of both national and international law.

Conditions in the camps are poor and deteriorating. They are overcrowded, with medical facilities, access to clean water and sanitation all woefully inadequate. These conditions are expected to worsen dramatically with the onset of monsoon season. The military is preventing humanitarian organisations, including the UN and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), from undertaking effective monitoring and protection in the camps.

The government has made numerous promises to release those held in the main camps, but these are little more than attempts to deliberately mislead the international community. Very little has come of any of Colombo's pledges. The worst kind of duplicity was seen just a few weeks ago, when the government announced it had released 10,000



**Over 250,000 Tamil civilians continue to be held in camps in Vavuniya with no freedom of movement, poor sanitation and in crowded conditions. Sri Lanka has run out of excuses for continuing to hold them, after all the international aid that has poured in for screening.**

displaced persons. In fact, we know at least 3,300 people had been moved from an internment camp to another detention facility. (UNHCR press release, 29 September 2009)

Here are the numbers as we understand them today (as of 15 September, UNHCR with government figures). Of the estimated 289,000 internally displaced Tamils at the end of the war, some 10,000 are held in detention centres on suspicion of having links to the Tamil Tigers, about 5,000 have managed to buy their way out of the camps by paying off the right people, and only 6,000 have been resettled. Those in the main camps in the north number about 264,000.

The ICRC has not been able to visit the main camps in the north since July, and they have never been able to visit those in detention facilities who are accused of working with or for the Tigers.

The government claims two reasons for continuing to imprison over a quarter of a million internally displaced persons (IDPs), but neither argument holds up. First, they say demining must occur before people can be allowed back, but this is nonsense, as tens of thousands could be released immediately to live with host families now living in towns and villages free of mines.

Second, the government claims to be conducting a screening process to weed out Tamil Tigers from the 264,000 in the internment camps. But no one can tell you how this process is pro-

ceeding. The government itself will not say how many people have already been through the screening process, the ICRC has not been able to monitor any screening at all, and when you ask people in the camps themselves, no one seems to know much about any such process. In any case, if the government has been conducting a screening process for four months now, why hasn't it been releasing those people who have passed the test?

We see the government is now promising "day passes" in one limited area (Mannar but not Vavuniya nor Trincomalee, where the bulk of the IDPs are) so IDPs can leave the camp, but we have yet to see this working in practice. It seems a strange idea in any case: if these people are allowed to go out for the day, then they surely have passed the screening process, so why aren't they allowed out all the time?

The fact is, all talk of release dates and resettlement schedules is nonsense. As the UN Secretary-General's Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Walter Kaelin, made clear on Tuesday, saying:

"It is imperative to immediately take all measures necessary to decongest the overcrowded camps in Northern Sri Lanka with their difficult and risky living conditions. The IDPs should be allowed to leave these camps voluntarily and in freedom, safety and dignity to their homes. If this is not possible in the near future, the displaced must be allowed to

stay with host families or in open transit sites. This is particularly important as the monsoon season is approaching."

Also on Tuesday, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon himself warned of the dangers of Sri Lanka's current policy, noting that the government risked creating "bitterness" if it failed to rapidly resettle Tamil refugees. Indeed, the harsh conditions in the camps are already sparking unrest, as we saw in Vavuniya at the weekend. But also in the longer term, the government's policy of imprisoning so many Tamil citizens without cause is only sowing the seeds of discontent that will grow into Sri Lanka's next violent conflict.

These are precisely the warnings the International Crisis Group has been giving and exactly the solutions we've been calling for months, and we are glad to see them accepted and supported at the very highest international levels. There is now no credible international voice saying anything else, and the Sri Lankan government has run out of excuses for continuing to keep these hundreds of thousands of innocent people prisoner.

The European Union and its member states have limited direct influence over the government of Sri Lanka, but working with our international partners, there are steps to take. The EU and its member states should:

1) speak publicly, clearly and often about the need for the displaced to have freedom of move-

ment immediately.

2) officially demand access to the camps for all humanitarian agencies and the media.

3) work to ensure that any disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation/reintegration (DDR) programs are ONLY conducted with ICRC involvement and a clear legal framework. (Currently, the UK Department for International Development, DFID, and the International Organization for Migration, IOM, are funding DDR projects in which the ICRC plays no part, and no legal regime governs the process.)

4) press the UN to put a binding time limit on its phased assistance to the camps. These should not become long-term facilities.

5) oppose further disbursement of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan due later this month until the government of Sri Lanka meets the commitments on resettlement it made in its July Letter of Intent a letter to the IMF (sent by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Finance and Planning to the IMF on 16 July 2009), which included a pledge to resettle 70-80% of IDPs by the end of this year (Point 10).

In general, no donors should fund any substantial development work until there is a clear plan, with cross-ethnic consultation and some restoration of democratic rights. We must ensure international monies are not used to fund unfair and destabilising political arrangements that set the stage for the island's next violent ethnic conflict.