

NEWS

Refugees moved between camps

A SMALL percentage of the Tamil refugees held in camps since May have allegedly been released amid growing international pressure on the Sri Lankan Government over its human rights record. But reports suggest that the civilians were merely moved from one place of confinement to another.

About 5,700 refugees left the huge camp at Menik Farm, in the country's north, on October 22 to be resettled, the Government said.

Rehabilitation Minister Rishat Badurdheen told the press that 5,700 IDPs were allowed to return to their homes, claiming this was in keeping with a promise to release 80% of the inmates within a 180-day deadline.

The minister also claimed that another 36,000 would be resettled "over the coming weeks" as he spoke to the BBC.

Many of these civilians have been transferred to smaller transit camps or small shelters that have been set up in schools and other government owned buildings in other regions of the North and East, reports said.

On the same day, the US State Department released a report of possible war crimes committed during the final months of the civil war, citing actions by government forces and the Tigers between January and May 2009.

Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa, brother to President Mahinda Rajapakse, had led a press conference week earlier, where journalists were taken on tour and a ceremony was held to mark the release of 1,200 IDPs.

The press were told that the people would be allowed to resettle back in their original homes in the Mannar district.

The ceremony was held at Manthai West transit camp, where thousands of "released" IDPs were being held. These civilians had been taken to Manthai West from the camps in Chettikulam.

But witnesses said the displaced boarded buses that merely took them back to the camps.

Sunday Times photographer Ranjith Perera, who was amongst the journalists taken on the tour, reported that he witnessed the IDPs board a bus, said to be taking them to their homes, and then return back to the same Manthai West transit camp.

"It was more of a photo opportunity for the journalists" reported the photographer.

"Every aspect of the exercise was a fraud designed to deflect criticism at home and internationally over the detention of Tamil civilians," said Sarath Kumara of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

He called the event a "public relations charade".

When government officials were asked by the paper about the IDPs of Manthai West they were told that "the original houses of the IDPs had suffered heavy damage due to the heavy fighting... it was not possible to send them directly to their homes as their houses needed repairs".

There were also 144 Tamil students who were being held at Poonthoodam Child Protection and Rehabilitation Centre, a Vavuniya internment camp, being forcibly transferred to Ratmalana Hindu College in Colombo. Parents were told they could visit "once or twice a month".

The Sunday Times reported of another case of IDPs, originally from Mullaitivu, who the government claimed to have resettled.

It was uncovered that these Tamil civilians were being held in a transit internment camp in Thunukkai and were merely "allowed to visit their villages in Mullaitivu" and "(see) for themselves the damage caused to their houses".

Even Minister Douglas Devananda confirmed that IDPs from Mullaitheevu and Kilinochchi



Concerns about the poor conditions at the Menik Farm complex (in light of impending monsoons) have lead to inmates being moved out - but rather than going home, they have been taken to other centres

districts in Vanni are now being held in the detention camps in Mirusuvil, Kodikaamam, Naavaladi and Kaithadi in Jaffna.

Separately, in Trincomalee fifteen IDPs were abducted from a transit camp located in the complex of Eachchilampathu Sri Shenpaga Maha Vidiyalayam in Seruvila division. They were all Tamil men, who were married and aged between 25 and 45.

A group of unknown persons dressed in army camouflage uniform were said to have taken them and their whereabouts are currently unknown.

This is a situation that is seen all over the North-East of Sri Lanka as these smaller indefinite "transit" camps are established, observers said.

And this is now an open secret. "The government has widely publicised recent releases from the camps yet Amnesty International has received reports that many are simply transfers to other camps where the displaced may be subjected to rescreening by local authorities," reads a report by the international NGO.

The organisation "confirmed the location of at least 10 such facilities in school buildings and hostels originally designated as displacement camps in the north" while stating that there were "frequent reports of other unofficial places of detention elsewhere in the country".

Places such as Poonthotham Teachers Training College have been identified as "irregular

places of detention" and widely condemned.

"The danger of serious human rights violations, including torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings increases substantially when detainees are held in locations that are not officially acknowledged places of detention and lack proper legal procedures and safeguards", said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Director.

Since the climax of the civil war in May, over 240,000 Tamil civilians remain forcibly held in internment camps by the Sri Lankan Government. Repeated promises by the government to send these IDPs home have been broken and pressure is mounting on Colombo to act quickly.

Donors 'frustrated' over lack of improvement

DONORS are increasingly concerned over the conditions in Sri Lanka's camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) and are less likely to provide funding if they continue to restrict IDPs' freedom of movement, say UN officials.

The donors are becoming increasingly "frustrated" over the closed nature and conditions of the IDP camps, said Neil Buhne, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Sri Lanka.

Conditions in the illegal detention camps, where over 240,000 Tamil civilians remain forcibly held against their will, have shown no signs of improvement as the threat of flooding from monsoon rains draws ever closer. "Among the donors we talked

to, there is a hesitation in terms of their assistance to camps over the next three or four months if there's not significant progress on people returning, or larger numbers of people being allowed to leave," Buhne told the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), a project of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The Menik Farm camp complex, surrounded by barbed wire and 24-hour armed security patrols by the Sri Lankan Army, is the single largest concentration of Tamils in the country.

The camp has expanded rapidly and consists of 10 zones, with a population of nearly a quarter of a million Tamil civilians.

A United Nations Common Humanitarian Action Plan report identified that US\$270 million were needed for 15 projects, to which Buhne had said the response had been "pretty good".

However, he carried on to say "donor fatigue is really in respect to continuing these closed camps... Donors have not said no, but they have indicated their concerns to us".

The Government vowed to release 80% of the camp inmates by the end of the year, but that target now seems increasingly unlikely. "Large areas where people lived or used for economic activity... have been extensively mined... but demining takes time..." President Mahinda Raja-

paksa said at a meeting of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue in Colombo. He was trying to justify the failure to release the detained persons by the promised date.

"There have been numerous promises, but there needs to be tangible change. We want concrete action instead of promises," a senior official from a western donor agency told IRIN.

"If the camps open, then I think there will be a lot of donors willing to give more. But as it stands, the concerns are too great to continue to support a closed camp scenario," the official added, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"The message we're getting is that it may be difficult to sustain

the amount of funding we've had over the last months into 2010," concluded Mr Buhne.

This follows a recent announcement by the UK government also that it would no longer be able to provide funding for the camps. The British decision was announced after a visit to the Menik Farm complex by the country's international development minister Mike Foster, who was accompanied on his rare visit by BBC reporters, who were able to document the dire conditions in which the people actually lived.

There have been at least 2 protests by the camp inmates, both of which have been violently suppressed by the Sri Lankan Army.