

NEWS

Camp inmates to be 'allowed out for short periods'

SRI LANKA announced last week that Tamil civilians still held in internment camps in Vavuniya will be allowed out for short periods from next month.

However, the government has failed to make adequate welfare provision for the 136,000 Tamil civilians it plans to release from internment camps, rights activists and opposition parties said.

An aide to the president also confirmed a pledge to close the facilities, reported BBC Online.

This follows earlier promises by the Sri Lankan government to free at least 80% of the population of the camps within 6 months of the end of the war. It has been over 180 days and less than half the detainees have been released.

International pressure is mounting to release the remainder from what rights groups are calling a form of collective punishment.

The latest government announcement was made by the special adviser to President Mahinda Rajapaksa, his brother Basil, on a visit to the largest camp, Menik Farm. Addressing a group of 'displaced' people, Rajapaksa said that from 1 December the camps would no longer be closed sites.

"We will allow complete freedom of movement," he told those held in the Menik Farm camp.

People will now be free to leave them for a day or two at a time, to visit friends and relatives, for example, he said.

Although they will not be able to leave permanently, he reiterated the government's pledge to resettle those displaced by the end of January.

Rajapaksa said the military had agreed that the detainees could be released because they no longer posed a security threat.

"The decision was taken as part of government moves to improve the rights and privileges of internally displaced people," said a statement posted on the government's website.

While observers welcomed the announcement, they warned the government that it must organise a structured resettlement programme.

"We are insisting that the International Committee of the Red Cross or the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) should be present when people are resettled," Nimalka Fernando, spokeswoman for the Democratic People's Movement, was quoted

as saying by AFP.

She said the government's plan to "haphazardly" send the civilians back to their villages was "seriously flawed".

The main opposition United National Party (UNP) said no long-term help in providing themselves with food or rebuilding their homes and livelihoods was being offered to the civilians who had already left the camps, let alone those still waiting to leave.

"People are to be moved out without proper welfare facilities," UNP general secretary Tissa Attanayaka said in a statement.

The camps were set up to contain the Tamil civilians who fled the war zone during the last stages of the war with the Liberation Tigers. Those displaced by the fighting were forced into the hastily built camps, with the funding for the camps coming from international aid.

Sri Lanka has drawn strong international criticism for holding people in the camps against their will, but the government insisted incarceration was necessary while the refugees were being screened for possible links with the LTTE.

The barbed wire enclosures at Menik Farm, which are guarded by the Army, have been among the most controversial aspects of the government's dealings with the Tamils.

Sri Lankan authorities insist the camps meet international standards, but they have refused to allow reporters access — except on brief tours organised by the Army. Many of those interred in the camps complained about poor food and sanitary conditions, reported the BBC.

Human rights groups criticised the detention, claiming it was an illegal form of collective punishment for Tamils.

There was also heavy criticism of the limited access permitted to the camps, with media heavily restricted and even aid agencies having problems gaining admittance on some occasions. The UN, diplomats and charities have also criticised the screening process, saying it is not transparent.

The government has also said that more than 1.5m mines must be cleared and basic infrastructure needs to be in place to allow people to return home.

Opposition parliamentarians in Sri Lanka have also protested about not being allowed access to the camps.



While the government has promised to release the inmates by the end of January, no plans have been made for their ongoing support once they are no longer detained in the Vavuniya camps

Displaced need more support

A TOP United Nations humanitarian official has welcomed the recent releases of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from camps in northern Sri Lanka, and underscored the need to ensure full freedom of movement for those remaining.

John Holmes noted in particular that the Menik Farm camp contains only half the number of displaced now than it did at the end of May, when the government declared an end to its military operations against the Liberation Tigers.

Holmes said he hoped to see continued progress in allowing people to leave the camps and restore their lives during a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama in Colombo, on Thursday November 19. He underscored the fundamental need for full freedom of movement for IDPs who remain in camps, an issue that he hoped could be rapidly resolved.

He hoped to see continued progress in allowing people to leave the camps and restore their normal life and dignity.

Holmes, the Under-Secretary-

General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, also noted that the returnees he met during the course of his three-day visit were pleased that they could return home.

At the same time, he added that the returns process could be improved, particularly through better consultation with IDPs and more timely information sharing with humanitarian partners on return plans.

Holmes reaffirmed the UN's commitment to working with the Government to improve the returns process, and to ensure satisfactory conditions in areas of return, especially in the fields of shelter, basic services and livelihoods.

Demining and mine-risk education were also important to ensuring the safety of returnees, he added.

"Both UN organizations and NGOs [non-governmental organizations] are ready to continue to help support IDPs in camps and assist returnees with their humanitarian needs, especially in terms of food, shelter, basic services, and livelihoods. The UN is also

keen to support longer-term recovery and reconstruction," Holmes said.

He also emphasized the need to build confidence between communities with a view to ensuring a just and sustainable peace and long-term political reconciliation.

In this regard, he welcomed not only the recent progress in facilitating returns but also increased government flexibility in terms of postconflict normalization, for example the recent opening of the A9 road which links northern and southern Sri Lanka.

Part of this confidence building and reconciliation needs to be a genuine accountability process dealing with the consequences of the conflict and possible violations of international humanitarian law by both sides, he said.

In addition to visiting the camps and meeting with IDPs and returnees, the UN humanitarian chief also met with government officials, including President Mahinda Rajapaksa, as well as other parliamentarians during his mission — his fourth to the country this year.

Releases cautiously welcomed

THE promise to free the remaining detainees was cautiously welcomed by some Western governments and international organisations, which have been providing most of the funding for the camps.

However, many expressed concern that the Government had not shared details of its plans to resettle the detainees, or allowed international organisations to observe or assist.

"Granting genuine freedom, to decide their own future, will be a major relief for those still trapped in the camps," said Mike Foster, Britain's Minister for

International Development.

"Humanitarian agencies must now be allowed to give them the help they need, in all the places they return to."

Mr Foster visited Sri Lanka last month and expressed disappointment at the pace at which detainees were being released, warning that British funding for the camps would be withdrawn.

In Brussels, the European Union said it remained cautious despite Colombo's announcement that the camps would be closed.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the announcements, but also called

for support for the displaced.

The government is urged "to improve the quality of the returns process, including through consultation with the IDPs themselves, and to ensure the best possible assistance and services to returnees", said Ban in a statement on 21 November.

Rene De Vries, country director for Oxfam in Sri Lanka, said allowing freedom of movement was a "good step forward from closed camps", but it was unclear to what extent the IDPs would move freely.

Continued on p15