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Sri Lanka Humanitarian update

Briefing Notes, 4 December 2009



This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic – to whom quoted text may be attributed – at the press briefing, on 4 December 2009, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

We are encouraged by the Sri Lankan government's long-awaited decision this week to allow increased freedom of movement for some 135,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) remaining in 20 closed camps in Vavuniya, Mannar, Jaffna and Trincomalee in the north of the country.

UNHCR field staff reported that over 7,000 IDPs from the Menik Farm camps in Vavuniya and another 25 people from the camp in Trincomalee left the IDP sites the first day the new policy of the Sri Lankan government came into force. Our teams are in the process of assessing the number of IDPs exercising their new freedom of movement over the past few days and report that people continue to leave the camps.

Generally, IDPs who wish to leave the camps are provided with a pass issued by the local authorities. These documents include details such as the district of origin, date of departure and date of return to the camp, temporary address for those who will remain away from the camps overnight and details of family members. This pass will also represent some form of identification for those who do not yet have their national identity card. A similar system is in place for the IDP camp in Trincomalee and the four camps in Mannar. In Jaffna, the pass system is in the process of being implemented in the remaining closed sites.

According to our teams on the ground, many people left their belongings in the camps, which is an indication that they intend to return to the camps. Some of those interviewed told UNHCR they wanted to visit friends and relatives in other camps, in Vavuniya town, and the centres where those with suspected links with the LTTE are being held.

While authorities say that there is no time limitation to the freedom of movement, there were reports that IDPs would only be allowed to stay away from the camps up to ten days. Many are also scheduled to return to areas of origin in the coming days and weeks under the government-organized return plan.

Our teams also report that, in general, people are happy to go back to their areas of origin where more basic services, such as health clinics and schools, are reopening.

We hope as this new freedom of movement continues and the IDPs are fully informed of the process, inconsistencies across the different camps and districts and bureaucratic obstacles will be ironed out so that all IDPs will be able to exercise their right to full freedom of movement.

While the return process is welcome, UNHCR hopes that the demining efforts keep pace with the rapid rate of returns and that IDPs are only returned to areas cleared of mines or where suspected areas are clearly demarcated. UNHCR will continue to follow up on these issues with the authorities. In addition, more efforts are needed in improving infrastructure as well as in development of livelihood support for the returnees. UNHCR is supporting the return process through the provision of a shelter grant of Rupees 25,000 (or US\$250) and non-food relief items to all returning families. We are also monitoring the situation and conditions in the return areas to identify gaps in terms of assistance.

At the end of the conflict in May 2009, some 280,000 newly displaced people were staying in camps in Vavuniya, Mannar, Jaffna and Trincomalee. Since August, over 150,000 IDPs from the former conflict zone – or more than 50% of the post-conflict total of IDPs – have left the camps in Sri Lanka's north and east, a majority of them as part of the Sri Lankan government's ongoing return process. This includes some 29,000 persons with specific needs such as the elderly and pregnant women who have also been released to care institutions.