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New deadline for IDP resettlement

COLOMBO, 2 June 2010 (IRIN) - The Sri Lankan government has issued a new deadline to resettle tens of thousands of conflict-displaced still living in camps.

More than 60,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) continue to live in three government camps, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) says.

The new Minister of Resettlement, Milroy Fernando, told IRIN an August deadline was "realistic" and that the process would be expedited to ensure people could return home as soon as possible.

"There was a previous deadline of April but that was not feasible," Fernando said, describing the process as a "top priority" for the nation.

"A lot of work has been concluded post-elections, including reconstruction of homes and the introduction of several livelihood assistance programmes. The new deadline is therefore realistic," he said.

Among his ministry's top priorities was to go beyond resettlement and initiate livelihood support mechanisms for the displaced, he said.

"To facilitate resettlement, the de-mining process too is being expedited. People are so keen to return home. But as a responsible government, we simply cannot allow people to return to their original villages before the completion of the de-mining work. People are very eager to go back to their own villages but we prevent those wanting to return to areas that are still uncleared," he said.

"We are currently making some plans to resettle and offer livelihood support in their original villages. To boost their livelihoods, the ministry now offers fishing gear and agricultural equipment for identified persons," he said.

Under the World Food Programme (WFP), IDPs are provided with food relief for six months from the date of return, while UNHCR provides a shelter grant of US\$220 paid in two instalments.

"A new livelihood support programme will soon be under way - especially catering to the agricultural and fishing requirements," Fernando added.

More than 236,000 people have returned home or are staying with host families a year after the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which had been fighting for an independent Tamil homeland for more than two decades.

On 28 May, the Sri Lankan president issued instructions to shut down the remaining camps within the next three months, including Menik Farm - the largest of the three - outside the town of Vavuniya and two smaller camps in Jaffna.

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