

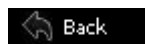
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SRI LANKA: Agencies raise concerns over IDP care once resettled



Photo: UN

UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, John Holmes, speaks with some resettled IDPs in northern Sri Lanka, 18 November, 2009

COLOMBO, 23 November 2009 (IRIN) - The release of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from camps in Sri Lanka's north is welcome, but the government must now ensure they are properly cared for, the UN and NGOs say.

The Sri Lankan government, under international pressure for months over camp conditions and the pace of resettlement, last week announced that [more than half the IDPs had been released](#).

It also announced the "total freedom of movement from 1 December" for remaining IDPs. Until now, the movement of IDPs from the heavily guarded camps has been restricted, earning criticism from the UN, human rights groups and NGOs.

"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.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the announcements, but also called for support for the IDPs. 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.

"We'll just have to see how far this will be implemented ... As far as we understand now, it's not total freedom," De Vries told IRIN. "It will be a pass system where people will be allowed to leave for a fixed period of time ... but then will have to return to the camp."

Support gaps

In Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, where the heaviest fighting took place, people are being returned to their houses with very little infrastructure in place, said De Vries.

"They are left to fend for themselves and we believe that NGOs can have a different attitude and approach to help them start up their lives again," he said.

A confidential report by local civil society organizations, which visited resettlement areas in Mannar and Kilinochchi in recent weeks, said situations varied.

"In Thunukkai [a village in Kilinochchi], one of the positive aspects I noticed was that people still have a standing house. Many returnees appreciated the fact that they have come back to their original homes from the barbed wire camp," states the report, a copy of which was obtained by IRIN.

"However, their freedom of movement is still in question," it says. "IDPs living in Menik Farm are given special ID cards and their movement, even after the return, has been carefully monitored," it said, referring to the largest camp.

In resettlement areas south and north of Mannar, IDPs resettled months ago are still living in open huts with poor infrastructure, and schools and hospitals far away, it said.

"Without any basic facilities [proper shelter, hospitals, transport, schools, drinking water, electricity and access to any form of livelihood activities] and basic right to freedom of movement, one has to wonder what it means to these IDPs to come back home," it said.

Consultation

John Holmes, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, welcomed the accelerated resettlement programme but said the returns process could be improved, and reiterated UN concerns about the lack of a consultative process with the IDPs.

"People need to be consulted as much as possible on where they are going, the status of their homes, their livelihoods," he told

reporters on 19 November, at the end of a three-day visit.

Neil Buhne, the UN resident and humanitarian coordinator for Sri Lanka, said the returns had been completed in the east, and since mid-October, more than 46,000 people had been returned in the north.

"We have pretty good access to the returnees, and so far, it has been satisfactory," he told IRIN.

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Themes: (IRIN) [Aid Policy](#), (IRIN) [Refugees/IDPs](#)

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