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22 September 2006

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Sri Lanka: The status of welfare centres or other camps operated by state authorities to house individuals who have relocated from areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (January 2006 - September 2006)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), on 31 May 2006, there were over 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sri Lanka due to conflict, of which almost 46,000 had been displaced by recent conflict (31 May 2006). At that time, it was estimated that close to 67,000 conflict IDPs were living in welfare camps (ibid.). On 26 July 2006, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that there were approximately 240 welfare camps across the country (26 July 2006).

In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, an official at the Canadian High Commission in Colombo stated that

[t]here is no firm figure of the number of the IDP centres, but there are at any point in time more than fifty throughout the northeast, ranging in size from several hundred [IDPs] to a few families. (Canada 15 Sept. 2006)

A 31 May 2006 UNHCR statistical summary of IDPs in Sri Lanka indicated that there are welfare centres located in the districts of Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Puttalam, Anuradhapura, Kurunegala and Colombo. Nearly half of the conflict IDPs living in welfare centres are located in the district of Puttalam (UN 31 May 2006).

According to the Official at the Canadian High Commission in Colombo,

[t]he centres may be free-standing tent camps, or be simply accommodation in public buildings. ... The UNHCR is giving preference to placing IDPs with host families, and is undertaking a needs survey to identify what type of material or logistical support is required to support that. (Canada 15 Sept. 2006)

In September 2006, revised UNHCR statistics showed a decline in the number of IDPs in Sri Lanka to approximately 208,000 (UN 12 Sept. 2006). According to the UNHCR, one factor contributing to the decline was a return movement of IDPs to Muttur [in Trincomalee district] (ibid.). No information on whether welfare centres have been closed as a result of this decline could be

found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

IDP access to welfare centres

According to correspondence from the Official at the Canadian High Commission in Sri Lanka,

[t]here has been very little movement of [IDPs] from LTTE-controlled territory to government-controlled territory: the dominant trend is displacement within each of the two areas as a result of conflict in the border areas. (Canada 15 Sept. 2006)

Regarding the ethnicity of individuals living at the camps, the Official noted that,

[t]here are no statistics on the ethnic populations of the camps, but with the recent return of Muslim IDPs from Kantale to their homes in Muttur, and the increased displacements in Jaffna, Mullaitivu and Batticaloa, the majority of the displaced are now certainly Tamil, although Muslim and Sinhalese are also among the displaced. (ibid.)

According to the Official, although there are no admission procedures to the welfare centres, the Sri Lankan government and the UNHCR have been conducting "some post arrival registration and surveys" (ibid.).

Conditions in welfare centres

A 29 June 2006 Amnesty International (AI) report indicates that in Sri Lanka, the welfare centres established for conflict IDPs are in poor condition compared with welfare centres for individuals displaced by the 2004 tsunami. AI attributes this difference in conditions to the large amount of international relief funding and the priority given to tsunami reconstruction (AI 29 June 2006). Conflict IDP welfare centres visited by AI were described as "very dilapidated, cramped and lacking in privacy and infrastructure" (ibid.).

Likewise, the official at the Canadian High Commission in Sri Lanka indicated that, given restrictions on movement of personnel and materials as a result of the conflict, many welfare centres are in "quite poor" condition (Canada 15 Sept. 2006).

Treatment of IDPs at welfare centres

The 29 June 2006 AI report indicates that IDPs of Tamil ethnicity living in temporary camps felt they were "particularly vulnerable to harassment" by the Sri Lankan security forces (29 June 2006). For example, AI notes that, in Karaitivu, Ampara district, there have been reports of increased checkpoints and more frequent demands to show identity cards to security forces near a Tamil tsunami IDP camp (29 June 2006).

In 15 September 2006 correspondence, the Official at the Canadian High Commission in Colombo stated that

[t]here are unconfirmed, anecdotal reports that residents of camps within both [government-controlled and LTTE-controlled] territories may occasionally be kept in the camps against their will, or required to return to their homes against their will. (Canada 15 Sept. 2006)

No further information on the treatment of IDPs at welfare centres could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Amnesty International (AI). 29 June 2006. "Sri Lanka: Waiting To Go Home - The Plight of the Internally Displaced." (ASA 37/004/2006)
<<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA370042006?open&of=ENG-375>> [Accessed 5 Sept. 2006]

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_____. 31 May 2006. Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "Statistical Summary as at 31 May 2006: Refugees and Internally Displaced Repatriation and Returns to and within Sri Lanka."
<<http://www.unhcr.lk/statistics/docs/StatisticalSummaryMay06.pdf>> [Accessed 6 Sept. 2006]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation in Colombo, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the High Commission of Sri Lanka in Ottawa and South Asia Partnership (SAP) Canada did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet sites, including: European Country of Origin Information Network (Ecoi.net), Factiva, Freedom House, Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC) for Sri Lanka, Human Rights Watch, The Refugee Council, ReliefWeb, South Asia Partnership (SAP) Canada, United Kingdom Home Office, Office of the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United States Department of State.

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