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Sri Lanka: Over half a million displaced people suffer effects of intensifying violence

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The increasing violence in Sri Lanka is creating new waves of displaced people and adding to the fear and insecurity felt by the hundreds of thousands of people who already have been forced from their homes by the conflict and the tsunami.

"The state's failure to provide adequate security and to ensure that attacks against civilians are prosecuted has resulted in widespread fear and panic," said Purna Sen, Asia Director at Amnesty International. "Almost every major attack in recent months has had a devastating ripple effect as people flee from their homes and villages in search of sanctuary."

Many of those displaced -- including those living in organized camps -- continue to be extremely vulnerable to violence and harassment by the Tamil Tigers, other armed groups, and even members of the Sri Lankan security forces.

On 17 June, one woman was killed and 44 others injured when grenades were lobbed into a church in the northern village of Pesalai, where thousands of people had sought refuge from fighting between the Tamil Tigers and government forces. Consistent eyewitness accounts have identified members of the Sri Lankan security forces as responsible for the attack on the church.

A total of 39,883 people have been displaced in the north and east of Sri Lanka since 7 April 2006, according to UN figures.

A report released today by Amnesty International also describes how as insecurity increases, people who have already been displaced several times are being forced to move yet again. Many have been unable to return home for decades and the increase in military activity is a major barrier preventing them from resettling and rebuilding their lives.

"It is the government's responsibility to protect the rights of these displaced people -- and numbering over half a million they make up a shockingly large constituency. The worsening security situation makes it

imperative for the government to provide them with increased protection," said Purna Sen.

Manikkam Maniyam, a 62-year-old Tamil man, is one of the many Sri Lankans who has had to move between several temporary homes within the country and abroad over the last 25 years. He first fled his home in Trincomalee in 1990 because of fighting and because his thatched house was burned down. He and his family paid a local fisherman to take them to India, where they lived in various refugee camps. In 1992 they were advised that the security situation was improving and moved back to Sri Lanka, living in a welfare centre in Alles Garden. Their shelter at the welfare centre was then destroyed by the 2004 tsunami. There are many other thousands of displaced people who are still waiting to return home.

Fighting between government forces, the Tamil Tiger rebels and other armed groups has been intensifying for the last six months, with more than 700 people killed this year alone according to the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission. Civilians face killings, abductions and 'disappearances'. Children are being recruited as soldiers.

Displaced people are particularly vulnerable to these abuses because they lack the support networks of their communities and local authorities. The violence also hinders development and aid agencies in their work with internally displaced people. In separate incidents in May a Norwegian Refugee Council employee was shot dead and three NGO offices were hit by synchronised grenade attacks.

On top of the insecurity, displaced people have to cope with a lack of employment opportunities and limited local health and education services. Alcohol abuse and high levels of domestic violence continue to cause concern.

While most tsunami camps are well-funded and of a reasonable standard, camps for those displaced by the conflict often lack electricity, transport and proper drainage. Residents in some camps say they fall ill from drinking dirty well water.

More than 639,400 people are estimated to remain displaced in Sri Lanka. Latest UN figures state that 314,378 people were displaced by the conflict. Around 325,000 people are estimated to remain displaced by the tsunami.

The increasing violence is forcing many Sri Lankans to flee the country altogether -- more than 2,800 people have sought international protection in India so far this year, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Notes to editors

The report, *Sri Lanka: Waiting to go home - the plight of the internally displaced*, will be available from 29 June at 00:01 GMT at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa370042006>

The Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), known as the Tamil Tigers, agreed a ceasefire agreement in 2002, but attacks by both parties have continued since then and escalated in the last six months.

UNHCR figures state that as at April 2006, 314,378 people remained displaced by the conflict. See www.unhcr.lk for more information.

The majority of displaced persons in Sri Lanka are from the north and east, where most of the fighting has taken place. Because of their geographical concentration in these areas, the Tamil population has experienced by far the greatest displacement. According to the most recent survey, a census of all displaced people in Sri Lanka conducted by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Refugees in 2002, 80.86% of the displaced population was Tamil, 13.7% Muslim, and 4.56% Sinhalese.

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