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Sri Lankan government must permanently release all civilians

Amnesty International is calling on the Sri Lankan government to permanently release civilians who have been illegally detained in camps following the end of the civil war six months ago.

“The authorities must make good on their declared intentions to free some 120,000 people and do so unconditionally,” said Yolanda Foster, Amnesty International’s expert on Sri Lanka.

“A permanent release from camps must be accompanied by assurances that people are not subjected to further questioning or re-arrest in new locations.”

“It’s also critical that the government maintain its responsibility to care for displaced people wherever they choose to go.”

The Sri Lankan government said today that families living in camps for the displaced in Vavuniya will be given a choice about whether to remain in camps, to seek alternative accommodations or attempt to return home.

However, Amnesty International has received information about restrictions on the way in which families can leave the camps. Media reports have suggested that some people may be asked to return to the camps after only 15 days.

Another concern is the lack of assistance for those who have been released so far. A church group has reported that people have been bussed from Manik Farm and simply ‘dumped, left on the road’ at Adampan in Mannar.

The government is giving conflicting messages about the process of return and it is not yet clear whether freedom of movement will also apply to camps in other parts of the country.

As releases and resettlement efforts accelerate, Amnesty International urges Sri Lankan authorities to allow displaced people to make informed and voluntary decisions about return and resettlement.

“The Sri Lankan authorities must alert displaced people to the living conditions in the places they come from so that they can make plans about their future. They should also provide them with clear information about their rights, their legal status and procedures for tracing family members,” Yolanda Foster said.

“Humanitarian and human rights organizations should be given unimpeded access to displaced people. For those attempting to resettle, such organizations should be permitted to monitor their safety and wellbeing and ensure their needs are being met, including that they are protected against further human rights violations.”

“Thousands of people have started to leave camps in the north east but the promise to unlock the camps must be followed up by the protection of the rights of the internally displaced people both within and outside the camps.”

Background

After fierce fighting and the deaths of thousands of civilians in May 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

By the end of May 2009 300,000 displaced people who had fled fighting were detained in camps supervised by the military.

In response to the unlawful detention of hundreds of thousands of displaced people, Amnesty International launched a global campaign “Unlock the Camps”, calling for liberty and freedom of movement for the displaced. Over 40,000 activists have taken action.