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Sri Lanka: Promise to free displaced must be followed by concrete action

Amnesty International welcomes the government of Sri Lanka's promise to lift by 1 December any restrictions on movement of at least 130,000 people displaced by the war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam.

"Now the Sri Lankan government needs to demonstrate that it will provide the displaced with necessary assistance such as shelter, food and security as they re-establish their homes," said Madhu Malhotra, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific deputy director.

Hundreds and thousands of Tamils who escaped the war have been detained in camps under military control for the past six months, deprived of their freedom of movement. Many of them survived months of difficult conditions as they were forced to travel with retreating LTTE forces who forcibly recruited civilians, including children, and in some instances used civilians as human shields.

The Sri Lankan government has agreed to give people a choice about whether to remain in camps to seek alternative accommodations or attempt to return home.

"For months vulnerable people have been held in inadequate conditions in camps lacking adequate sanitation facilities and clean drinking water. If the Sri Lankan government follows through on its promise to allow thousands of people to return home, it would be the first step in the long struggle ahead for people rebuilding their devastated lives," said Madhu Malhotra.

Amnesty International stresses the continued need to protect the rights of internally displaced people both within and outside the camps.

The organisation also urges the Sri Lankan authorities to abide by the principles of International humanitarian law and ensure that displaced people are supported to make voluntary and informed decisions about their future.

"Humanitarian and human rights organizations should be given unimpeded access to displaced people and those attempting to resettle to monitor their safety and wellbeing and ensure their needs are being met, including that they are protected against further human rights violations," said Madhu Malhotra.

Background

Since the war ended in May, an estimated 12,000 displaced people (including children) suspected of links to the LTTE have been arbitrarily arrested, separated from the general displaced population and detained by the

authorities in irregular detention facilities, such as vacated school buildings.

Amnesty International is concerned about lack of transparency and accountability in that process, which is conducted outside of any legal framework and the increased dangers to detainees when they are held incommunicado.

Persons arrested on suspicion of links to the LTTE and accused of crimes should be charged with legitimate offences, tried and prosecuted in accordance with the law.