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## **Sri Lanka: escalation of conflict leaves tens of thousands of IDPs without protection and assistance**

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*The protracted armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has escalated dramatically since the beginning of 2006, with an estimated 3,300 people having been killed and over 200,000 internally displaced, in addition to the hundreds of thousands uprooted earlier on in the conflict and by the tsunami of December 2004. Both sides to the conflict are accused of deliberately targeting civilians and committing grave human rights violations with impunity. The government as well as the LTTE have severely restricted access to conflict areas under their control, thus leaving more than half of the newly displaced people and other affected populations without adequate international protection and humanitarian assistance. The areas mostly affected by renewed violence and displacement include Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa.*

*Neither the government led by President Mahinda Rajapakse, nor the LTTE seem interested in continuing peace talks, the last round of which ended on 29 October 2006 without result. Increased international political pressure on both conflict parties to return to the negotiating table for meaningful peace talks is needed to bring this conflict to an end. In the short term, the main priority must be to stop the targeting of civilians by both conflict parties, and ensure safe access by humanitarian agencies to conflict-affected areas.*



## **Background and causes of displacement**

More than two decades of civil war between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), seeking independence for Tamil-majority areas, have devastated large parts of Sri Lanka's north and east. The war has claimed the lives of an estimated 65,000 people and uprooted more than one million others, often several times, with the large majority internally displaced on the island.

Hopes for durable peace, raised after a 2002 ceasefire and subsequent peace talks, were shattered when the talks collapsed in 2003. From then on, low-intensity violence has been steadily building up, with open fighting breaking out in December 2005, leading to the displacement, in January 2006, of thousands of people in Jaffna (Reuters, 11 January 2006; CHA et al. April 2006). One decisive factor for this rise in violence was the November 2005 presidential election which brought to power the "hawkish" Mahinda Rajapakse, strongly supported by Sinhala nationalist parties. The LTTE had prevented Tamils in its areas of influence from voting, effectively causing the moderate Ranil Wickramasinghe to lose the elections and allowing the Tigers to avoid re-engagement with a peace process from which they believe to have gained little so far. Now the conflict opposes two parties apparently willing to pursue their differences by military means (CFR, 11 September 2006).

Peace talks were re-started in Geneva in mid-February 2006, but were subsequently abandoned after a series of provocations made by both sides during

April. On 7 April 2006, a leading pro-LTTE parliamentarian was assassinated in Trincomalee. This was followed by a bombing of a market in Trincomalee and serious communal violence. On 25 April, a suicide attack in Colombo, presumed to have been carried out by the LTTE, against an army commander led immediately to aerial raids against LTTE bases in Sampur, close to Trincomalee town (CPA, May 2006, p.12, 35).

In July 2006, in reaction to travel and aid restrictions imposed by the government to rebel-held areas, the LTTE cut off water sources near Muttur (Trincomalee), affecting the irrigation of adjacent agricultural land in a government-controlled area. In subsequent heavy fighting, government forces re-captured Muttur and the strategically important Sampur. The fighting prompted 45,000 persons to leave Muttur in the first days of August, more than 30,000 of them heading to Kantale (RI, 11 September 2006).

The current conflict is particularly brutal, targeting civilians indiscriminately and without making any attempts at sparing them (CPA, May 2006). Throughout September and October 2006, government forces intensified aerial attacks on LTTE targets. In October 2006, the military started an offensive into LTTE-held areas in the north, particularly the Jaffna peninsula, suffering heavy casualties in the process (AFP, 11 October 2006). The general security situation, particularly in the east, has continuously deteriorated and displacement figures continued to rise. Over 3,300 people have been killed in 2006 alone, and the conflict may be spreading to areas hitherto spared or on the fringes of the fighting. Tensions have been rising in Ampara, and the LTTE carried out

an attack on the southern tourist town of Galle (CHA, May 2006; Times, 19 October 2006; AFP, 8 November 2006).

Both the government and the LTTE have consistently built up their armed forces in anticipation of renewed conflict, with the LTTE specifically targeting the Tamil diaspora to finance its “final war” (CPA, May 2006, p.31; HRW, 15 March 2006). The break-away of the LTTE’s former eastern commander Colonel Karuna Amman, in April 2004, continues to further destabilise the situation. This split has been a constant cause of fighting among Tamil factions and has raised tensions between the main antagonists, with the LTTE accusing the government of supporting Karuna, whose influence in the conflict has increased throughout 2006 (CPA, May 2006, p.33).

The last round of peace talks, held in Geneva on 28 and 29 October 2006, did not yield any results and reinforced perceptions that the antagonists only met due to international pressure but that neither had the will to engage in meaningful peace talks (BBC, 29 October 2006). One key stumbling block was the refusal by the government to re-open the A9 highway to Jaffna, citing security risks. The LTTE made the lifting of the blockade, which effectively cuts off the Jaffna peninsula from the rest of the country, a precondition for returning to the negotiating table (Colombo Page, 29 October 2006). After the failed peace talks, the violence continued unabated and seemed to be increasing, as both parties accuse each other of intentionally sparking a full-scale civil war. Civilians remain a target and are used strategically by the warring parties (AFP, 8 November 2006).

## **Over half a million people displaced by conflict**

Many of Sri Lanka’s IDPs have had to flee several times and have been uprooted for some 20 years. The December 2004 tsunami made half a million people homeless, many of whom had previously been displaced by the conflict.

Although such multiple displacement may create considerable overlap – the extent of which is not clear – three distinct groups of IDPs are currently made reference to in Sri Lanka. UNHCR reports over 201,000 newly displaced since April 2006, with a peak of almost 240,000 at the beginning of September. To those numbers, the UN agency adds some 312,700 IDPs from the pre-2002 conflict, and a December 2005 estimate of 457,000 people remaining displaced by the December 2004 tsunami (UNHCR/MNBD, December 2005; 31 May 2006; 4 September 2006, 23 October 2006).

Due to the unknown extent of the overlap between the different IDP groups, and because no information on displacement is available from inaccessible areas in the conflict zone, an accurate figure for total current displacement cannot be given. Available numbers suggest conflict-related displacement of around 520,000 in October 2006, to which some inaccessible IDP groups would have to be added, as well as a considerable – but unknown – number of unregistered IDPs living with host families. Another group not included in official figures are night time IDPs who live at home during the day and spend nights in camps for fear of violence (CPA, February 2003, p.24). The total number of displaced people – including tsunami-

IDPs – may lie somewhere between 600,000 and 800,000.

Most recent IDPs come from Trincomalee and Batticaloa Districts. Some 45,000 persons fled Muttur town (Trincomalee) in early August following an LTTE offensive against the town (UNHCR, September 2006, p.3). Another 35,000 people, mostly Tamils, fled Trincomalee to Batticaloa in mid-August and are now part of the over 60,000 newly displaced in that district (HRW, 19 September 2006, p.22). Others fled from Trincomalee to western Sri Lanka and to India.

Next to Trincomalee and Batticaloa, the areas mostly affected by new displacement include Jaffna, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Jaffna experienced significant displacement in January 2006, and again in mid-August with up to 48,500 people displaced in the district alone, in addition to unknown numbers of displaced in the fighting zone further south. This number dropped slightly by the end of October 2006. In Kilinochchi, some 35,000 people who were displaced in January 2006 had returned home by April, but since then, over 44,000 people have been newly displaced. Mullaitivu hosts around 13,000 IDPs from the north (UNHCR, September 2006).

Tamils displaced from or within government-held areas constitute the largest number of IDPs, followed by Muslims. Sinhalese IDPs make up the smallest group. Breakdowns along ethnic lines of the new displacement have not been made available.

### Humanitarian access severely restricted

Both the government and the LTTE block access to, and information flow from, the areas where they carry out military operations. As a result, the humanitarian community has no or only extremely limited access to an estimated 130,000 IDPs, particularly in Jaffna, Mannar, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and parts of Batticaloa (UNHCR/GIS, 31 October 2006). Shielded from international scrutiny, the warring parties are reported to commit human rights abuses with impunity, leading to calls for an independent human rights monitoring mechanism to be established (HRW, 19 September 2006; RI, 18 September 2006).

The government has started to impose lengthy registration procedures on international NGOs, and issues limited work permits for the north and east, while of-

The following districts are particularly hit by recent displacement (either from within the district or from other districts):		
Batticaloa:	60,646	Trend up
Kilinochchi:	46,084	Unvaried
Jaffna:	43,231	Trend down
Mullaitivu:	21,497	Trend up
Vavuniya:	10,519	Unvaried
Mannar:	9,914	Unvaried
Trincomalee	4,498	Trend down
Puttalam	2,108	Unvaried
Ampara:	2,090	Unvaried
<i>(Source: UNHCR, 23 October 2006)</i>		

ten refusing permission for UN relief convoys to cross into LTTE-held areas (HRW, 19 September 2006, p. 24; UN OCHA, 31 August 2006; Reuters, 29 August 2006). This results in an extremely reduced presence of international staff in IDP areas and a general lack of information regarding protection needs and human rights violations in conflict areas.

A turn for the worse came with the execution, on 5 August 2006, of 17 local employees of Action Contre la Faim, almost all of them Tamils. A report by the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission held government troops responsible for the killings, whereupon the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator considered suspending humanitarian activities in Sri Lanka for as long as the government was reluctant to provide any explanation regarding the executions. The government said it would conduct a further investigation (UN DPI, 30 August 2006; Xinhua, 31 August 2006).

Aid workers are at times accused by Sinhala nationalist politicians, activists and media of being pro-LTTE. In September 2006, there have been stray incidents of Sinhalese mobs attacking convoys of aid workers in Muttur (Trincomalee). Reportedly, NGOs providing aid to IDPs in Kantale (Trincomalee) were asked to leave the IDP sites (HRW, 19 September 2006, p.20). Humanitarian personnel are also targeted in Tiger-held territories. In Ampara district, aid workers employed with international NGOs have been reportedly intimidated by the Tigers to make them quit working in the region (CSM, 27 September 2006).

In mid-August 2006, government forces made parts of northern Batticaloa inac-

cessible by closing the checkpoints between Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Only UNHCR and ICRC were eventually given access to some 200,000 local residents and about 25,000 Tamil IDPs – out of a total of 35,000 – who had fled to Batticaloa from Trincomalee (HRW, 19 September, p.22).

Most aid agencies left Jaffna in August 2006 due to increasing insecurity. With the government denying humanitarian access overland via the A9 highway and the LTTE refusing to guarantee the safe passage of humanitarian assistance to the peninsula by sea, tens of thousands of IDPs are caught in an extremely precarious situation. This was only partially relieved when the government started airlifting food to Jaffna at the end of October; with severe malnutrition widespread, a humanitarian crisis was not yet averted (AFP, 25 October 2006; UN News Centre, 22 September 2006). The vital A9 highway, which the government of Sri Lanka keeps closed, is also the main access point to areas of displacement within the LTTE-controlled Vanni, including Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu.

Access difficulties also lead to a great lack of reliable information regarding the living conditions and protection needs of many of the newly displaced and the local population living in conflict areas. UNHCR and its strategic partners have set up a project aiming at monitoring and disseminating information regarding protection needs and at providing legal protection information to the newly displaced population in the north and east (UN OCHA, 31 August 2006; NRC, 11 September 2006, p.1).

## **Protection and humanitarian concerns**

Any improvement since 2002 in terms of violence suffered by the displaced has been reversed by the recent deterioration of the security situation. Human rights violations, which had been continuously reported in the north and east even after the ceasefire agreement was signed, have become much more serious again since the beginning of 2006. Both government forces and the LTTE demonstrate blatant disrespect of their obligation under international humanitarian law to protect civilians in armed conflict. Neither side spares the population and often actually includes civilians in their military strategies. The LTTE and Karuna both recruit children; the latter possibly helped by certain parts of the government forces (UN Sri Lanka press release, 14 November 2006). Furthermore, government forces have been involved in disappearances and summary executions of people in their custody (HRW, 19 September 2006; AI, June 2006; CPA, May 2006). The impunity with which both sides to the conflict conduct their warfare will constitute a serious challenge for any future reconciliation process.

The escalating conflict has serious implications on the food security, livelihoods and personal safety of the affected population, both the displaced and host communities who often also suffer from the fighting. Tensions among the affected populations have intensified and it is feared that, unless humanitarian relief can be distributed adequately and equitably in the near future, communities in many conflict areas will suffer serious,

and possibly long-term, damage (UN OCHA, 30 August 2006).

While the majority of all conflict-IDPs live with friends and family, some 67,000 live in so-called welfare centres run by the government, where they continue to lead a precarious existence. Most welfare centres are in a state of disrepair as the government and international donors have failed to provide the necessary resources for maintaining them. While originally designed as a temporary measure pending permanent return, the sites have become the de-facto permanent home for thousands of people, mainly Muslims in Puttalam and Tamils in Jaffna, but also in Vavuniya (UNHCR, 31 May 2006). The fact that many tsunami-affected IDPs have received assistance relatively quickly created tensions among many long-term conflict-IDPs (UNHCR, December 2005).

The squalid, overcrowded camp situations often lead to psycho-social problems, and subsistence conditions remain critical, particularly regarding access to basic social services such as clean water and sanitation, shelter, education and health care. This lack of services particularly affects the newly displaced, even where humanitarian access is possible. In Puttalam, for example, food rations are often not handed out in time or in sufficient quantities, due to administrative complications and, arguably, indifference or hostility toward the displaced population (CPA, 18 June 2006; CPA, 19 July 2006, p.3).

## **Social structure and inter-ethnic relations in conflict zones**

More than two decades of open or low-intensity conflict, the effects of the 2004 tsunami and now the recent intensification of violence have had a devastating and long-lasting effect on the social structure and economic resilience of Sri Lankans living in the conflict areas (UNHCR, September 2006, p.3; Asia Foundation, January 2004).

Eastern Sri Lanka – particularly Trincomalee and Batticaloa – is home to all three major ethnic and religious groups: Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims. Many areas are extremely poor and have difficulties hosting newly arrived displaced populations. In a situation where the antagonists in the conflict use and consciously exacerbate ethnic tensions to increase their own support base, and where humanitarian aid is frequently absent, the often very fragile social structures are under enormous strain; communal aggression towards IDPs, including marginalisation and discrimination, appear increasingly common (CPA, 18 June 2006; UNHCR, September 2006, p.2; HRW, 19 September, p.3). On the other hand, acts of solidarity with the displaced have also been reported (CHA, August 2006).

In Trincomalee, in connection with heightened ethnic tensions, both the LTTE and Sinhalese political and military forces have been building up their power bases, with the Karuna faction also reported to be gaining strength (CPA, 21 April 2006, p.5).

Partially due to a lack of internal cohesion, the Muslim minority has difficulty gaining political influence in Sri Lanka, while it is extremely negatively affected by the conflict. Muslim attempts to be more influential in peace talks progress

but slowly (CPA, May 2006). Muslim IDPs are particularly affected in the exercise of their civic rights, such as the right to vote (IOM, April 2006).

### **Return and reintegration**

During 2002 and early 2003, almost 350,000 persons had returned home. Since mid-2003, return movements have slowed down considerably (MRRR, UNHCR, 31 May 2005). As of October 2006, there was no clear return pattern in Sri Lanka. Many recent returnees have been re-displaced and the security situation has made lasting large-scale returns all but impossible.

Some return movements have reportedly been involuntary, such as that of most of 25,000 IDPs who had fled Muttur and taken refuge in Kantale. This return movement, carried out by government forces, was partially induced through cutting services in the area of displacement. The government is under great pressure to find solutions to the impact of the conflict on the civilian population, with IDPs being the most visible consequence of the conflict. Humanitarian and human rights agencies have stressed that, particularly in the current volatile security environment, any decision by IDPs to return to their home areas must be voluntary and based on an informed decision (UNHCR, September 2006, p.2; RI, 11 September 2006; HRW, 19 September 2006, p.19).

In addition to conflict-related insecurity, poor livelihood opportunities, coupled with enormous mine risks in the heavily populated and fertile areas of Jaffna and the Vanni remain the main obstacles to IDP returns. The pre-2002 war had al-



ready damaged an estimated 90 per cent of the houses owned by the displaced, and reconstruction had not advanced much. Land and property restitution issues are another obstacle to the return of thousands of non-Tamils displaced from LTTE-controlled areas, as well as for Tamils from government-held areas (ADB/UN/WB, May 2003). The tsunami destroyed an additional 100,000 houses, most of them in the north and east, particularly in Batticaloa and Ampara (UNHCR Shelter Update, August 2005). Post-tsunami reconstruction is ongoing but severely slowed down in the current conflict areas.

Since the beginning of displacement in the 1980s, and particularly after the 2002 ceasefire agreement, international donors have concentrated on restoring infrastructure in areas of return, while neglecting to some extent the immediate needs of the displaced, particularly in welfare centres. The suspension of peace talks in 2003, and again the renewed outbreak of violence in 2006 has seriously set back re-construction efforts in the war-affected zones and thereby the return and reintegration of the internally displaced.

### **National response**

During 2005, the national response focused on post-tsunami reconstruction, with the Ministry of Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation creating the Task Force for Relief (TAFOR) and the Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN). Coordination with local government structures and national and international aid agencies has often been difficult.

The November 2005 presidential elections have prompted some restructuring in government agencies and ministries. The new Ministry of Disaster Management is at the same time the Ministry of Human Rights. Its National Disaster Management Council is tasked to coordinate and manage relief activities pertaining to natural and man made disasters. The ministry has now been mandated to coordinate the national IDP response, although the relatively junior Disaster Management and Human Rights Minister seems to have little political influence to move forward the IDP issue.

The Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA), established in November 2005, now combines TAFREN and TAFOR into one agency responsible for reconstruction and development activities in post-tsunami and post-conflict areas. At the same time, two new ministries were created, the Ministry of Resettlement and the Ministry of Nation-Building and Development. The new entities are intended to follow a coherent strategy with regard to both conflict- and tsunami-displacement. However, human rights organisations are concerned that changes at ministerial level do not sufficiently translate into effective action on the ground (AI, June 2006, p.5). Furthermore, Sri Lankan NGOs raised concerns regarding RADA's transparency, accountability, and lacking possibilities for civil society to participate and be consulted. RADA was also seen as too centralised and inflexible (CPA, June 2006).

The mandate of the Chairman and Commissioners of the National Human Rights Commission expired on 3 April 2006. The capacity of the Commission to carry out its human rights monitoring

work impartially has been undermined by the subsequent direct appointment of new of Commissioners to the body made by the President, instead of it being appointed by a special committee. The new Commissioners therefore lack the independence and legitimacy to fulfill their mandate effectively. In the absence of functioning national human rights monitoring, it has been recommended to put in place an independent international human rights monitoring system (AI, 31 March 2006; AHRC, 22 May 2006; HRW, September 2006, p.6).

### **International response**

UNHCR has been the lead agency for IDPs since 2004. The newly established Colombo-based Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) brings together UN agencies and NGOs, with the aim of coordinating the relief response. Other coordination mechanisms are the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies and the IDP Working Group, both bringing together UN agencies and NGOs.

UNHCR and NGOs say they have difficulty in participating in the national decision-making process, for example via the new Human Rights Minister charged with coordinating the national IDP response. Coordination within the international humanitarian community also appears to encounter problems, to a large extent because the severely reduced access to the actual field operations created additional distance between Colombo headquarters and the field.

The quick aid response to the December 2004 tsunami brought to light the contrasting dire living conditions of the conflict-displaced and the fact that more

could be done for them, with the necessary political will. Differential treatment of tsunami- and conflict-IDPs was discussed widely throughout 2005 and into 2006, and touched upon fundamental principles of humanitarian aid, such as non-discrimination (UNHCR, December 2005; AI, June 2006). While conflict-IDPs now do receive more attention, the problem of ensuring equity persists, mainly with regard to humanitarian access to the displaced. IDPs in southern and government-held areas receive more and better humanitarian aid than those in inaccessible conflict areas in the north and east, while these are the ones who had already been disadvantaged and neglected during the protracted displacement situation. In addition, the tsunami-affected population in LTTE-held zones did not profit from the generous international response because government and LTTE could not agree on an aid-sharing agreement.

Increased international political pressure on both conflict parties to return to the negotiating table for meaningful peace talks is needed to bring this conflict to an end. In the short term, the main priority must be to stop the targeting of civilians by both conflict parties, and ensure safe access by humanitarian agencies to conflict-affected areas.

*Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Sri Lanka. The full country profile is available online [here](#) .*

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Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the [List of Sources](#) page of the Sri Lanka country page.

## About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org).

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