



Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation

TRO is a registered charity (Number L 50706) with the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL)

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Re: World Refugee Day

As we honor the 14 million refugees on World Refugee Day, 20 June 2007, TRO would also like to highlight the plight of the world's Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). According to UNHCR figures there are currently 24.5 million IDPs worldwide, who have been displaced by conflict.

The conflict in Sri Lanka has resulted in over one million Tamil refugees leaving the island to Canada, Western Europe and other parts of the world. Currently, approximately 100,000 Tamils live in camps in the South of India.

Those that have left the island of Sri Lanka and found refuge in other countries are protected by the 1951 *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, but there is no similar convention or system of international protection for IDPs. As a result the plight of the IDPs in the NorthEast is left to the "goodwill" of the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). Military offensives over the past 18 months by the GoSL have been the primary cause of the displacement of 300,000 IDPs.

Currently there are approximately 750,000 IDPs in Sri Lanka.

These include:

- 300,000 IDPs displaced over the last 18 months as a result of military offensives by the GoSL
- 350,000 IDPs from the pre-2002 Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) who have not been able to return to their homes due to a variety of reasons, which include the designation of their former towns and villages as High Security Zones (HSZ)
- 100,000 Tsunami IDPs who still live in temporary shelters or have been displaced once again due to the conflict

These IDPs have been subject to multiple displacements (some have been displaced up to 10 times) shelling, bombing, murder, rape, torture, and loss of livelihood. The children have been deprived of access to education and fear abduction and harassment by paramilitaries affiliated to the GoSL.

Some IDPs, as witnessed by the UN and other international organizations, have also been forced by the GoSL and its security forces to return to areas from which they were displaced.

TRO and TRO supported Community Based Organizations (CBOs) currently care for or provide humanitarian assistance for 85,000 of these IDPs despite the obstacles, restrictions and embargoes imposed by the GoSL.

TRO wishes to raise awareness of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka. The situation is critical and worsening by the hour. TRO would like to emphasize that it is the responsibility of the Government of Sri Lanka to protect, uphold and enforce the national and international humanitarian standards and International Humanitarian Law. These include not using food and medicine as a weapon of war.

TRO petitions the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the International Community to address the Humanitarian issues affecting IDPs in Sri Lanka:

1. End all embargos, restrictions and other impediments to the flow of humanitarian relief items and construction materials (for temporary shelters for IDPs) to the NorthEast
2. Allow local and International NGOs to freely access areas affected by the conflict in a timely manner
3. End restrictions on international humanitarian agencies and their international staff: denial of visa renewals, refusal of visas, the controversial work permits and limiting the mandates of iNGOs
4. Adhere to the international Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement – GoSL should stop forced eviction of civilians by targeted shelling / bombing of villages



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5. Ensure that the prior incidents of “Forced resettlement” (as verified by the UN and others) do not recur and that human rights and human dignity are respected.
 - a. Ensure that IDPs are informed of their rights and that there is transparency regarding the development and implementation of humanitarian policies
 - b. Ensure that all affected communities are consulted at all stages from initial displacement to resettlement
 - c. IDPs have a right to choose when to return and should be allowed to visit the areas of return prior to return
 - d. Ensure that resettled IDPs receive compensation and assistance to restart their livelihoods and have access to their properties in the High Security Zones (HSZ)
6. Ensure free access to education for IDP children
 - a. Thousands of children, some as young as 6 year old, have to pass through numerous checkpoints close to their camps and schools on their way to school everyday.
7. IDP Camp management
 - a. Most camps in the East do not currently meet internationally accepted SPHERE minimum standards. The GoSL and the international community must ensure that these standards are maintained
 - b. Camp Security in the East – ensure that the abductions and harassment of youth and children by paramilitaries and security forces are stopped
8. Decentralize the decision making and bureaucracy to the ground level and away from Colombo. Currently, there is a lack of coordination and a confusing number of governmental ministries and authorities mandated to work with IDPs.
9. Ensure that IDP camps are not attacked by armed forces as happened in November and December 2006 when IDP camps in Vaharai were shelled and 86 IDPs killed
10. Ensure that all affected communities are treated equally and that there is not discrimination in the disbursement of relief assistance and compensation
11. Remove the GoSL freeze on TRO bank accounts. TRO is the largest local NGO in the NorthEast and has access, staff and volunteers to areas that iNGOs and the GoSL have limited access.
12. Ensure the safety of local and international humanitarian workers so that they may better serve the needs of the IDPs and other war and tsunami affected persons. In the last 18 months 33 humanitarian workers have been killed: This includes 7 TRO, 17 ACF, and 2 SLRC humanitarian workers. NGOs are also maligned in the state and private media and by the political parties. This reduces the space available for them to operate and restricts their ability to deliver humanitarian relief to the affected communities.

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