



Sri Lanka



Quick facts

Number of IDPs	400,000
Percentage of total population	2.0%
Start of current displacement situation	1983
Peak number of IDPs (Year)	520,000 (2006)
New displacement	Up to 280,000
Causes of displacement	Internal armed conflict, human rights violations
Human development index	102

The protracted armed conflict in Sri Lanka between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May 2009. Between January and April 2009, there were over 200,000 IDPs in the northern LTTE-controlled Vanni region, and between October 2008 and June 2009, up to 280,000 people fled to government-controlled territory. The vast majority of these IDPs were interned in closed military-run camps in Vavuniya, Mannar, Jaffna and Trincomalee Districts. The government justified this with the need to screen the IDPs for LTTE affiliation and to demine their areas of origin, even though many could have been released to stay with host families in towns and villages free of mines. By October 2009, the most vulnerable IDPs (some elderly people, pregnant women and disabled people) had been allowed to leave the closed camps. Some of those without specific vulnerabilities had also left the closed camps and had been taken to transit sites for further clearance before being released to rejoin family members, especially in the east.

In November 2009, the number of IDPs released started to rise, and in December the government significantly accelerated releases in the run-up to the presidential elections scheduled for January 2010. At the end of the year, a little over 100,000 IDPs remained in camps in Vavuniya and other areas of the north; a pass system in place since the start of December meant their freedom of movement was still limited. The implementation of the pass system differed between camp sections, and some IDPs were denied passes as they were suspected of LTTE affiliation. IDPs received conflicting messages and sometimes no information from authorities on the duration for which the passes were valid, but generally, IDPs holding passes were able to leave their camp for a period of up to two weeks. In addition, more than 11,000 IDPs suspected of LTTE membership were held in "separatee sites", where they had been detained without due process nor access to any humanitarian organisation, including the ICRC.

Significant numbers of the people who were allowed to return to their areas of origin in late 2009 were unable to return to their precise places of origin, as these had not yet been demined according to UN security standards and many homes were still severely damaged. They remained in displacement, staying with host families or in transition camps, and continued to face difficulties rebuilding their livelihoods.

In western Sri Lanka, over 60,000 Muslim IDPs remained in displacement in Puttalam, 20 years after being forced out of the north and north-west by the LTTE in 1990. Many still faced poverty and difficult living conditions. With the end of conflict, the older generation of IDPs was keen to return but the younger generation, which had not known life outside the camps and the region, was uncertain about this option. The IDPs in Puttalam are among the 200,000 IDPs who had been displaced by the armed conflict before 2008. This number also includes thousands of people displaced from Jaffna and Trincomalee Districts who remained unable to return because their areas of origin had been designated as High Security Zones. In late 2009, the government started coordinating the return of Puttalam IDPs with that of those displaced most recently in Jaffna.

For returning IDPs in all parts of Sri Lanka, recovering the property they had left remained difficult. Under Sri Lankan law, more than 80 per cent of the national territory is owned by the state, and private ownership can only be established if land has been occupied continuously for ten years. It was also unclear whether land deeds allotted by the LTTE in the Vanni would be recognised by the government.

The effectiveness of the government's response has been limited by organisational difficulties. The Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief is the nominated focal point, but the overlapping mandates and responsibilities of ministries and agencies have led to delays, poor coordination and duplication of activities. The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, through its National Protection and Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons Project, is responsible for coordinating the process of drafting a national IDP law, which would establish an Internally Displaced Persons Authority. In 2009, this process had not moved forward since 2008. Generally, greater political will was needed to uphold the rights of IDPs.

From January to May 2009, UN and other agencies had no access to IDPs in the Vanni, who did not receive any protection or assistance as a result. From November, UN agencies and IOM had access to parts of the Vanni, but international NGOs did not gain access to the return areas in the north and were therefore unable to implement urgent protection activities there, including those that go beyond basic necessities and promote durable solutions for IDPs.