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Sri Lanka: Civilians displaced by conflict facing severe humanitarian crisis

The protracted armed conflict in Sri Lanka between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) appeared to be nearing an end in 2009 with the LTTE cornered in a small area of the northern Vanni region. However, there remained almost half a million internally displaced people (IDPs) in the country.

In 2008, the scene of conflict had shifted to the Vanni where an estimated 230,000 civilians were displaced by intense fighting. Most of the civilians in the Vanni were prevented from leaving by the LTTE which forced them to remain in the active conflict zone. Many civilians were displaced a number of times as the LTTE lost ground to government forces and they became squeezed in a rapidly shrinking conflict zone. As of April 2009, the UN estimated that approximately 50,000 displaced people were trapped in the Vanni. Civilians were facing serious violations of international humanitarian law by both parties to the conflict and a severe humanitarian crisis with only the ICRC able to gain access to them through a sea route.

Over 150,000 IDPs had managed to flee the Vanni between November 2008 and April 2009. They were being housed in camps and sites in the government-controlled districts of Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee and Jaffna. These IDPs faced a number of protection concerns such as restrictions on their freedom of movement and a climate of fear due to the camps being heavily militarised.

In the Eastern Province, where there had been massive displacement in 2006 and 2007, almost all the IDPs had returned to their areas of origin, with exceptions including those whose land had been designated as a High Security Zone by the government. Although economic activity increased in the east, insecurity remained a pressing issue and threatened the sustainability of the returns.

Insecurity also persisted in the Jaffna peninsula, home to thousands of IDPs who in many cases have been living in protracted displacement after their homes and land were declared as falling within High Security Zones. Another group undergoing protracted displacement was that of more than 60,000 Muslim IDPs living in Puttalam since 1990 after being forced to flee from the north by the LTTE.

Sri Lankan authorities maintained restrictions on humanitarian organisations and following a government directive in September 2008, virtually all agencies were forced to relocate from the Vanni at a time when hundreds of thousands of people were displaced within an increasingly hazardous conflict zone with extremely limited humanitarian relief. Many international NGOs have also encountered restricted humanitarian space when trying to access the IDPs who have arrived to government-controlled areas.

Background

The armed conflict in Sri Lanka between government forces and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continued into early 2009, with government forces on the verge of victory on the battlefield. The conflict which began in 1983 has its roots in historical differences between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the largely Hindu Tamil minority, and has led to the one of the worst internal displacement crises in Asia.

A ceasefire was agreed upon by the two parties in 2002 but there was no resolution to the conflict and full-scale fighting resumed in eastern Sri Lanka from mid-2006 onwards. By July 2007, the LTTE had lost all the territory it controlled in the east to government forces (Reuters Alertnet, 2 December 2008). In 2008, the scene of combat shifted to the northern Vanni region under control of the LTTE.

During the first few weeks of 2009, government forces took over key areas in the Vanni formerly held by the LTTE, including its administrative hub Kili-nochchi, the Elephant Pass link to the Jaffna peninsula, and Mullaitivu on the east coast. The LTTE banned nearly all civilians from leaving areas under its control, forcing them to move behind the front line with them. Many civilians trapped in the Vanni were displaced a number of times and as the LTTE lost ground to advancing government forces, the civilians were squeezed into a shrinking conflict zone (HRW, 15 December 2008, p.13). Although thousands of civilians managed to escape the Vanni to government-controlled areas from January 2009 onwards, at least 50,000 remained behind and were forced into a dwindling

space in the area north of Puthukkudiyiruppu in Mullaitivu district. Concerns over the safety and security of the trapped population remained very high as intense fighting continued (UNOCHA CHAP, February 2009).

In the Eastern Province, the population of which is split equally between ethnic Tamils and Muslims and a sizeable Sinhala minority, the removal of the LTTE in 2007 brought benefits to all three communities. However insecurity persisted, with violent clashes between Tamil and Muslim communities aggravated by flawed and ethnically divisive provincial council elections in May 2008 (ICG, 15 October 2008, p.i). There were also concerns among these two groups that the government planned to “Sinhalise” the east. These concerns were heightened due to actions by the government such as its development plan for Trincomalee district which included a High Security Zone (HSZ) that was preventing the return of displaced Tamils to their lands (ICG, 15 October 2008, p.26). Insecurity also persisted in the Jaffna peninsula, home to over half a million Tamil residents, where there was no armed conflict but continuing heavy militarisation (Economist, 9 October 2008).

Some analysts maintain that in order to secure a stable peace after a military victory, the government must address the long-running grievances and ethnic antagonisms that lie at the root of the conflict, and also fully put into effect a largely dormant law on regional autonomy that would permit Tamil and other minorities a degree of flexibility in meeting local needs (NYT, 21 March 2009).

Numbers displaced and dynamics of displacement

According to UNHCR, by February 2009 there were over 281,000 people internally displaced from the phase of the conflict that began in 2006. This was in addition to a caseload of over 214,000 conflict-displaced people from the period up to 2006 (UNOCHA CHAP, February 2009) bringing the number of people displaced in Sri Lanka by conflict to almost half a million.

As a result of the ongoing conflict and access restrictions, estimates of IDPs in the Vanni have varied. In December 2008, government agents in the Vanni were estimating that 350,000 people were displaced there, but this figure did not take into account the significant numbers displaced before 2006 who had been displaced again and counted twice (HRW, 23 December 2008, p.23).

By the end of 2008, UN agencies were estimating that 230,000 people had been displaced due to the intensified fighting in the north in the second half of 2008 (Reliefweb, January 2009). By early April, some 150,000 IDPs had fled the Vanni and were being housed in at least 29 transit sites, public buildings and camps in government-controlled Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee and Jaffna districts (IRIN, 6 April 2009). The UN estimated in April that at least 50,000 people remained trapped in the Vanni, but the government calculated the figure to be as low as 1,000.

In Jaffna, in addition to more than 4,800 IDPs who had arrived from the Vanni by April 2009 (WFP, 2 April 2009), the existing population has faced multiple dis-

placements over the last 20 years as a result of various military operations, forcible expulsions by the LTTE and the establishment of 18 High Security Zone (HSZs) covering 190 square kilometres of land where over 30,000 families had been living. In December 2007, approximately 21 per cent of Jaffna's population were living in displacement, with over 83,000 people displaced from the period up to 2006 and over 23,000 from 2006 onwards (CPA, INFORM, April 2008, p.8).

Of the 170,000 or so people displaced at the end of March 2007 in Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts in the Eastern Province, less than 15,000 still remained in the two districts by November 2008; the rest had returned to their areas of origin (IRIN, 12 November 2008). At the end of 2008 there were 8,300 IDPs in Batticaloa and 4,200 in Trincomalee (USDOS, 25 February 2009).

In western Sri Lanka's Puttalam district, over 60,000 people remained in a situation of protracted displacement in 2009. The IDPs from the Muslim ethnic group were expelled in 1990 by the LTTE from its areas of control in the north including Mannar, Jaffna, Mullaitivu and Kili-nochchi (Brun, 2008, p.172).

Humanitarian and protection concerns of the IDPs

The Vanni

A government directive in September 2008 ordered a withdrawal of humanitarian agencies from the Vanni, stating that due to the intensification of the conflict in the Vanni, the security of aid workers could no longer be guaranteed. UN and humanitarian agencies except the ICRC

and Caritas were forced to relocate from the Vanni to government-controlled Vavuniya (IRIN, 16 September 2008), leaving behind more than 300 national staff who were Vanni residents, to whom the LTTE refused to issue travel passes. This withdrawal had a severe impact on the population remaining in the Vanni, the majority of which was displaced. The most acute needs were for food, shelter, water, sanitation, health care, psychosocial counselling and education (HRW, 23 December 2008, p.25).

Between 2 October and 5 December 2008, seven UN food convoys were dispatched to the Vanni but the quantity of food brought into the Vanni was still well below the minimum daily nutritional requirements of the population. Tens of thousands of IDPs remained without adequate shelter, and due to a severe shortage of properly constructed latrines, there were concerns about the outbreak of waterborne diseases. The concentration of displaced people in the Vanni led to an acute shortage of health facilities and medicine. There was also severe psychological stress among the displaced population but very few trained counsellors to respond. The limited number of schools that continued to function had to cope with an influx of tens of thousands of students displaced from their original schools (HRW, 23 December 2008, pp.27-34).

In addition to the lack of basic necessities, civilians including children in the Vanni faced forced recruitment by the LTTE, which had significantly increased its forced recruitment practices. The LTTE banned nearly all people from leaving areas under its control, effectively trapping thousands in an increasingly hazardous conflict zone. It also forced civilians to

engage in dangerous labour, including the digging of defensive bunkers (HRW, 15 December 2008, pp.3-4).

Displaced civilians were further affected by February 2009, when the LTTE retreated to an area of roughly 100 square kilometres in north-eastern Mullaitivu district. Their only source of assistance by this point was the ICRC, which was evacuating sick and wounded people out of the combat zone by sea and bringing in food supplies by ship. By March, most IDPs were near a government-declared 14 square kilometre “no-fire zone” along the coast at the eastern edge of the area of combat. Most civilians in the zone were living shoulder-to-shoulder in dangerous and squalid conditions, with food, medical assistance and clean water all limited (IRIN, 24 March 2009).

Serious violations of international humanitarian law were being committed by both sides as the LTTE continued to prevent people from fleeing and fired on them as they tried to escape. The LTTE also continued to forcibly conscript, and to operate and fire from among civilians who it forced to act as its shields. Meanwhile government forces were shelling civilian areas, including in the no-fire zone which it had unilaterally declared, without any significant pause (ICG, 9 March 2009). Satellite imagery taken during the month of March indicated extensive shelling occurring in and around the no-fire zone (USAID, 10 April 2009).

According to a statement in mid-March by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a range of credible sources indicated that more than 2,800 civilians had been killed and 7,500 injured since 20 January, many of them

inside the no-fire zone (OHCHR, 13 March 2009). By April this number had risen to at least 6,432 killed and 13,946 injured inside the conflict area (AP, 24 April 2009). The same month, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the LTTE leadership to allow civilians to leave the conflict area and the government to uphold its responsibility to protect civilians and avoid the use of heavy weapons in civilian areas (UNSG, 3 April 2009). In response to calls for a humanitarian pause, the government announced a two-day pause in fighting in April during which there was no exodus of the trapped civilians into government areas.

Vavuniya, Mannar and Jaffna

IDPs fleeing the Vanni have faced fighting and heavy shelling from both sides, and many spent days hiding in water bunkers. Some of them have feared that the LTTE would target them for reprisal attacks for disobeying orders to stay within conflict areas (IRIN, 1 March 2009).

The IDPs arriving in government-controlled areas from January to April were being screened at three main checkpoints and some of those suspected of being LTTE members were separated from the others. However, this screening for weapons and explosives was largely superficial and did not address the real need to separate combatants from civilians (NRC Sri Lanka, April 2009). Although the screening is a necessary security measure for the government and humanitarian agencies to help ensure the civilian nature of IDP camps, concerns remain about the lack of accountability and transparency in the process (CPA, March 2009, p.15).

Those arriving from the Vanni have been housed in transit sites and camps in Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee and Jaffna districts. The large majority are in Vavuniya where they are living in converted schools or colleges, or in an emergency site at Menik Farm Zone 2 and 3, all of which have become seriously overcrowded (AI, March 2009). Approximately 9,700 IDPs have been taken to a semi-permanent camp in Menik Farm Zone 1 (AI, March 2009), which has caused much controversy because of accusations that it is intended to house Tamil IDPs on a long-term basis against their will (ERC briefing to the UNSC, 27 February 2009).

There is some variation in the freedom of movement for IDPs in camps in the different districts, but overall major restrictions remain in place. In most camps the IDPs are not allowed to leave even for short periods. Two camps at Kalimodai and Sirikundel in Mannar have been in existence since March 2008, and house approximately 900 IDPs, only a small fraction of whom have been allowed to leave permanently. To leave, they have to obtain a pass for a specific purpose from the army and have a family member act as guarantor (CPA, March 2009, p.40).

A few IDPs have been allowed to leave camps to live with host families or allowed out of the camps for specific purposes. This has been largely limited to the very elderly, those requiring hospital treatment, or particularly vulnerable people such as those with disabilities (AI, March 2009). This number has not exceeded 1,260 individuals out of a current population of over 150,000 (NRC Sri Lanka, April 2009).

Humanitarian agencies continue to face restrictions to humanitarian space in accessing some of these IDP camps. In certain cases, agencies assisting in camps have to either deliver assistance at the entrance or can carry out their specific tasks but are not permitted to talk to the beneficiaries, leading to increasing difficulties in carrying out protection and monitoring activities (CPA, March 2009, p.40). All the IDP camps are heavily militarised with armed forces personnel. In large camps, these personnel are stationed both inside and outside the camps. The high level of militarisation has increased the fears of IDPs, especially when the forces are based within the camps (CPA, March 2009, p.41). There is no access at all to some sites, including Padavyia in Anuradhapura (NRC Sri Lanka, April 2009).

The Representative of the UN Secretary General (RSG) on the human rights of IDPs, Walter Kälin, highlighted these concerns following a fact-finding mission to Sri Lanka in April 2009, and stressed that a clear and objective procedure to allow freedom of movement must be developed, communicated to the IDPs and implemented without delay. He also called for the unhindered access of humanitarian agencies to meet the basic needs of the IDPs and for the agencies to be able to address overcrowding issues. The RSG urged respect for the civilian character of IDP sites through the removal of military personnel to the periphery and restoration of civilian policing and administration (UNRSG Statement, 7 April 2009).

Humanitarian agencies in Sri Lanka have stressed that civilians should be able to return to normal life as soon as possible.

The longer-term security and sociological implications of containing tens of thousands of IDPs in camps are considerable and the early resettlement of civilians in their place of origin must remain the principal objective (Solidar, February 2009).

In August 2006, following renewed fighting with the LTTE, the government closed the A9 highway which passed through the Vanni to link Jaffna to the rest of the island. The closure has led to the isolation of Jaffna's 600,000 displaced and non-displaced inhabitants and strangled its economy, causing severe shortages of food, fuel and electricity (Newsweek, 16 October 2008). Insecurity remains a major problem in Jaffna and since 2006 there has been a wave of disappearances and killings of civilians, most of them during overnight curfews. In 2007, Jaffna accounted for half of Sri Lanka's disappearances and more than a quarter of its extra-judicial killings (Economist, 9 October 2008).

Compared to the attention received by IDPs in other areas, the displaced in Jaffna have received less attention and the focus has largely been on the smaller caseload displaced since 2006. The pre-2006 IDPs receive government rations that are decided on a cash amount set in 1995 while those displaced from 2006 onwards receive WFP rations based on caloric content. As the cost of essential food items has risen, the amount of food that can be purchased from the allocation of government funds has shrunk considerably and is insufficient to meet the needs of IDPs. Although some assistance is provided by agencies and cash-for-work programmes, these are ad hoc and inconsistent, and do little to resolve the structural problems of

dependency and poverty (CPA, INFORM, April 2008, p.8).

Eastern Province

In the areas formerly controlled by the LTTE in eastern Sri Lanka, most of the 170,000 civilians displaced by the fighting in 2006 and 2007 have returned to their homes. With international assistance, they have begun to repair their damaged houses and fields and to rebuild their lives (ICG, 15 October 2008, p.25) although challenges for restoration of livelihoods remain, in particular in stabilising communities and sustaining returns (UNOCHA CHAP, February 2009).

Almost two years after taking over control of the entire Eastern Province, the government has yet to permit the return of IDPs to some particular areas such as Sampur, which has been demarcated as a HSZ, and a small section of western Batticaloa (CPA, March 2009, p.54). The HSZ in Sampur has forced around 8,000 Tamils off their land without legal process (ICG, 15 October 2008, p.25). Land ownership remains a complicated issue in the east and in many cases following displacement different ethnic groups have claimed ownership of the same land. Tensions over land have persisted between Tamil and Muslim communities, with Muslims claiming that displaced Tamils have been settled on their land by the government (Sunday Observer, 17 August 2008).

Economic activity has increased throughout the Eastern Province, as the promise of stability has begun to lure new private-sector investment and international development assistance. Security, however, remains the most pressing concern for

Tamils. With the LTTE still operating in the east, the Province retains a heavy military, police and paramilitary presence, and Tamils must undergo regular checks, round-ups, and surveillance (ICG, 15 October 2008, p.25).

Batticaloa district has seen a particular deterioration in security since mid-2008. Political killings, enforced disappearances, attacks on police and army outposts, robberies and other criminal acts have become daily occurrences. Much of the violence is related to an increasingly bitter conflict between members of the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) led by the Eastern Province Chief Minister S. Chandrakanthan (known as Pillayan) and supporters of the TMVP founder and government minister V. Muralitharan, (alias Karuna). TMVP cadres from the Pillayan and Karuna factions are widely accused of criminal activities including extortion, abduction and killings. There is credible evidence to suggest that many of those killed have been targeted by the TMVP and government security forces as LTTE members or supporters. Although the large majority of civilian victims have been Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim people have also been targeted (ICG, 16 April 2009, pp.3-4).

In January 2009, UNHCR called upon the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure security for civilians in the east, citing a significant increase in the number of killings, abductions and injuries in the areas of return, including 24 civilian deaths recorded in November 2008 in Batticaloa district alone. UNHCR expressed concern over the impact of the security incidents on the sustainability of the return process, with returnees in Batticaloa reportedly feeling increasingly intimidated

and facing restrictions on their movements (UN News Centre, 9 January 2009). According to the agency, more than 50 returnee families had left their villages due to fear and insecurity; others were no longer sleeping in their own homes and several families were gathering in one house at night for security reasons (VOA, 11 January 2009).

Puttalam

Over 60,000 IDPs have been living in more than 140 camps in Puttalam since 1990. Currently 41 per cent of the displaced population are children who have known no other home than the Puttalam camps (GOSL, March 2009). Conditions in some camps remain poor, with basic facilities lacking. In one case, there are 40 makeshift latrines and one water tap serving 3,500 IDPs (The Times, 19 January 2009). In October 2008, heavy rains and flooding hit Puttalam, and 80 camps were reported to be inundated, forcing some 1,000 IDP families to move to other camps (Sunday Times, 26 October 2008).

For more than ten years, the IDPs have received rations from WFP and the government and provision for shelter from the government. Displaced families in Puttalam fear losing their IDP status, among other reasons because it has also developed into a social category and an identity (Brun, 2008, p.142). According to UNHCR, a majority of IDPs in Puttalam have already in fact integrated locally, with over 11,000 families purchasing some land in the district (IRIN, 27 September 2007). Many IDPs have used all their savings to buy land in Puttalam linked to a World Bank housing project to be completed in 2011. The World Bank is assisting with the con-

struction of 7,850 permanent houses in IDP camps in Puttalam and the project is covering only those who have land deeds indicating ownership (Groundviews, 10 August 2008).

Aid agencies dealing with the IDPs in Puttalam have suggested that they could survive without assistance. The government's stance, however, has been that the IDPs will one day return to their homes in the north, and there has been no political acknowledgement that the northern Muslims' presence in Puttalam can be permanent. This attitude has hampered the local integration process, and reinforced the perception of the IDPs as marginalised, dependent on aid and "out of place". Some, but not all, displaced Muslims in Puttalam could survive without aid, but most rely on unstable casual work and without receiving rations would have few chances to rebuild their lives and restore all the assets lost in the north (Brun, 2008, p.247).

Situation of displaced women and children

Women and children are believed to make up over 80 per cent of the IDP population in Sri Lanka. In the conflict zones of the Vanni, the inadequacy of latrines and washing facilities has increased the danger of sexual and gender-based violence against displaced women, as they have been forced to use open-air facilities (HRW, 23 December 2008, p.32). Thousands of pregnant women caught up in the fighting between government forces and the LTTE have urgently needed health care, at a time when health services have been disrupted or are unavailable (IRIN, 6 April 2009).

An estimated 33,000 women have been widowed in the Eastern Province during nearly three decades of war and displacement, and a majority are under the age of 30 (BBC, 18 December 2008). The widows in the east are in urgent need of employment and livelihoods opportunities (Hindu, 26 March 2009).

In Puttalam, changing conditions due to displacement have opened up new possibilities for women and led to their becoming more active in paid employment than prior to displacement. Women are paid less than men as casual labourers, and have therefore found work more easily than men, causing some to become the breadwinners of the family. Further economic migration from Puttalam to countries in the Middle East has also largely been a female phenomenon, particularly in cases where male members of the family have not been able to find work after displacement (Brun, 2008, pp.205-208).

The LTTE has systematically recruited and used children as soldiers. In 2008, with the army advancing into the Vanni, the LTTE went beyond its long-standing "one person per family" forced recruitment policy and required two or more family members to join its ranks, depending on the size of the family. After a significant decrease in reported LTTE use of child soldiers in recent years, the recruitment of children may have been on the increase since September 2008 (HRW, 15 December 2008, p.3). According to reports from IDPs in Vavuniya who have recently fled the Vanni, by April 2009 the LTTE had resorted to forcibly recruiting children as young as 12 and, in some cases, four to five people from the same family (BBC, 6 April 2009).

Children have been killed, maimed and wounded in the areas of conflict in the Vanni (UN News Centre, 20 February 2009). Casualties since January 2009 are believed to include hundreds of children killed and more than 1,000 injured (OHCHR, 13 March 2009). UNICEF has called upon the LTTE to guarantee the free movement of the civilians trapped in the north, including up to 75,000 children. Many of these children have been displaced a number of times (IRIN, 23 January 2009). The conflict has additionally disrupted the education of at least 60,000 students in the north (IPS, 6 April 2009).

At least one in four children displaced by ongoing fighting between troops and the LTTE is malnourished, according to the Sri Lankan health ministry. Malnutrition among children below the age of five in Mullaitivu district has reached 25 per cent, the highest in the island. The results are believed to be indicative of malnutrition among children still trapped in the war zone (AFP, 11 April 2009). Eastern Sri Lanka's Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts, which went through large-scale conflict and displacement in 2006 and 2007, are among the districts outside the conflict zone in the north with the highest number of children underweight for their age. Despite numerous initiatives to alleviate malnutrition, the condition was in 2008 still entrenched in areas of Sri Lanka affected by the conflict (IRIN, 15 August 2008).

National and international responses

The central government has played the principal role in response to the conflict and internal displacement in northern Sri Lanka. However the security forces have

appeared to be at the forefront of implementing the government's decisions, including through various tasks related to humanitarian relief and screening. It is unclear to what degree the district and local civilian administrations have a say in the response (CPA, March 2009, p.46).

Following the enforced departure of humanitarian agencies from the Vanni, the government asserted that humanitarian needs were being met through its own efforts, but these statements have not been backed by statistics which the government has provided showing the level of assistance or by its explanation of distribution mechanisms, and they have been contradicted by reports of government officials on the ground and UN and other humanitarian agencies (HRW, 23 December 2008, p.26). In Vavuniya, the government initially insisted that it would take primary responsibility for the IDPs and that there was no need for NGOs to become involved. However, when faced with an influx of IDPs, the government turned to humanitarian agencies to provide a range of basic goods, raising questions as to whether it was adequately prepared and had funds to support a large number of IDPs on its own (CPA, March 2009, p.46).

In 2008, the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission drafted a bill on the protection of displaced people. The proposed bill covered areas such as IDP registration, freedom of movement, and welfare and protection mechanisms.

Humanitarian space in Sri Lanka continued to remain restricted with the government having become increasingly hostile in its treatment of humanitarian agencies. Since 2006, humanitarian organisations

have faced numerous challenges including violence against staff. At least 63 national staff are believed to have been killed between 2006 and 2008, while other forms of violence have included staff abductions. Humanitarian agencies have also faced a wide range of restrictions including an effective prohibition on travelling to and working in particular areas (CPA, March 2009, pp.48-49). This is particularly relevant for agencies with a protection role (NRC Sri Lanka, April 2009).

Following the government directive to leave the Vanni in September 2008, no national or international humanitarian agency except the ICRC and Caritas had access to the trapped IDPs and civilians. Within the Vanni, insecurity further limited the capacity of the remaining humanitarians; a CARE staff person trapped in the Vanni since September 2008 was killed in the no-fire zone in March 2009 and an ICRC staff member killed in April 2009. Humanitarian workers also faced risk of recruitment by the LTTE, with the UN reporting in March 2009 that two national members of staff and three family members had been forcibly recruited (USAID, March and April 2009).

In April 2009, UNHCR, UNICEF and the ICRC had intermittent access to camps in Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee and Jaffna hosting Vanni IDPs. However, several international NGOs reported that getting authorisation from the government to provide services to IDPs in camps remained difficult, as did gaining any sort of contact with the displaced (USAID, April 2009). Despite visits to Sri Lanka by a number of UN officials in 2009, including the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) John Holmes and RSG Walter Kälin, who urged for im-

proved humanitarian access, several restrictions remained on access.

In December 2008, the UN's cluster approach was introduced in Sri Lanka in the place of a sector-based organisation of the humanitarian response. While clusters such as food, health and education were

rolled out, the protection, emergency shelter and camp management clusters were not. UNHCR had been leading these sectors and was reluctant to change to clusters given the sensitivities related to government involvement and humanitarian space (UNRC/HC communication to ERC, 18 December 2008).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's Internal Displacement profile. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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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.

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