



# Sri Lanka

## Quick facts

Number of IDPs	485,000
Percentage of total population	2.5%
Start of current displacement situation	1983
Peak number of IDPs (and year)	800,000 (2001)
New displacement in 2008	230,000
Returns in 2008	126,000
Causes of displacement	Internal armed conflict, human rights violations
Human development index	104

Hundreds of thousands of people remained displaced in Sri Lanka during 2008. In the north and east, their displacement was caused by intense fighting between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which began in 2006 after four years of a ceasefire situation described as “no war and no peace”. In 2008, the government formally ended the ceasefire and since then has pursued a military solution. Most of those displaced from 2006 onwards have been from the Tamil and Muslim minority groups. There is also a significant population remaining displaced from the period before 2002.

In the west of the island, Muslim IDPs in Puttalam remained in displacement after being forced out of the north and north-west by the LTTE in 1990. Few attempts had been made to find durable solutions for them, and in the meantime they faced poverty and difficult living conditions.

In 2008, the sphere of combat shifted to the north and several thousands of people became newly displaced in the Vanni region which was then under the control of the LTTE. The LTTE was forcing them to remain. Their vulnerability in the face of a mounting offensive increased in September, when the government ordered all humanitarian agencies except the ICRC and Caritas to leave the Vanni.

From September, IDPs in the Vanni were desperately short of food. Convoys up to December were only able to provide 40 per cent of the minimum requirement of the affected population. Tens of thousands of people were living without adequate shelter, health facilities in the Vanni were stretched to the limit and IDPs were facing acute shortages of essential medicines. Sanitation facilities remained very poor, leading to concerns over possible outbreaks of waterborne disease.

People who had managed to flee to government-controlled areas still faced great risks to their life and liberty. As of October 2008, the government continued to hold over 800 people who had fled the LTTE areas in enclosed camps, suspecting some of them to be LTTE collaborators.

IDPs in all parts of Sri Lanka were facing major challenges in recovering the property they had left, as more than 80 per cent of the territory is owned by the state, and private ownership can only be established of land which has been occupied continuously for ten years. The government has also designated areas as High Security Zones, leading many IDPs to lose their farms and fishing areas, and so their livelihoods.

An end to the conflict could lead to new displacements ending and returns being possible. However, durable solutions for returnees depend not only on the security situation improving but also better livelihoods opportunities emerging. Even after the armed conflict ends essential reconstruction would need to precede return or local integration. This would probably depend on investment by the international community. The long-term IDPs may have a better chance of durable local integration than return.

The effectiveness of the government’s response has been limited by organisational difficulties. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights 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.

Legislators were drafting a national IDP law at the end of 2008, but greater political will was still needed to uphold the rights of IDPs. The IDP Protection Unit of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka had spoken out to promote IDPs’ rights, for example on forced returns, but the prevailing political environment had limited the impact of this advocacy.

Over the past years, UN agencies have taken the lead in providing protection and assistance, and while they have been successful in maintaining their role in areas outside of the northern conflict zone, they have not been able to promote the access of all other national and international protection agencies. National members of staff of national and international organisations have also faced intimidation. The coordination between agencies has generally been effective, but the response will continue to fall short as long as the government limits access to IDPs and returnees in various parts of the country.