

# Protracted Muslim displacement in Sri Lanka

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**In order for the protracted displacement of the IDPs in Puttalam to end, the government and humanitarian community will have to prioritise this group.**

Despite having few prospects of returning home or finding other durable solutions, people living in protracted displacement in Asia often receive limited attention and acknowledgement of their status from governments and humanitarian agencies, especially in comparison to other IDP groups.

One such example is in Sri Lanka, where several cycles of displacement have taken place since conflict broke out between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983. A ceasefire during 2002-06 enabled many IDPs to return but large-scale conflict resumed from mid-2006, leading to hundreds of thousands of new displacements. Although the armed conflict came to an end in May 2009, there remain several different IDP populations in the country.

The plight of one displaced group from the north living in a protracted situation in Puttalam district of western Sri Lanka since 1990 has frequently been overlooked. This group is made up of more than 60,000 Muslims who were forced to flee their homes – largely in Mannar, Jaffna and Mullaitivu districts – in October 1990 when LTTE cadres went from village to village, announcing that Muslims had 48 hours to leave LTTE-held territory or face reprisals. Many of them fled with only their clothes and a little money, leaving behind as much as 5,000 million rupees (\$46 million) worth of property and valuables.<sup>1</sup>

Following their expulsion, the northern Muslims have been living in IDP camps and settlements in Puttalam for almost 19 years. Currently 41% of the displaced population is made up of children who have known no home other than the camps and settlements. Many of the IDPs' traditional family

structures have broken down, with women and men forced to leave their families in search of a livelihood, with both going abroad in several cases, leaving the care and protection of children to elderly relatives or older siblings. There continue to be conflicts between the displaced and host community over the limited resources and jobs in the area.

Although some humanitarian agencies maintain that the displaced are integrated and no longer in need of aid, there has been no political will to acknowledge their presence in Puttalam on a permanent basis. This attitude has hampered the local integration process and reinforced the sense of IDPs as being out of place and lacking 'local citizenship' such as access to certain livelihood opportunities such as fishing and government jobs.<sup>2</sup> According to the Government of Sri Lanka's statistics, around 80% of the IDP population remain without a permanent source of livelihood and survive through manual labour.

More than half of the displaced have managed to purchase land in the IDP settlements but their individual plots are very small and sustain the sense of impermanence. There has been some hope of a durable solution of local integration for these land-owners since 2007, when the World Bank approved a \$32 million housing project for the construction of over 7,500 permanent houses for those Puttalam IDPs who have deeds indicating their ownership of land.

Some IDP leaders have stressed that as soon as conditions are safe for return, the entire group of displaced will go back to its areas of origin. A small number of IDPs in Puttalam did return to Jaffna during the ceasefire years, only to come back to Puttalam soon after. Despite an end to the

conflict in 2009, any eventual return would pose significant problems with many of the IDPs' houses destroyed during the conflict, or occupied by Tamils displaced by the conflict. Under Sri Lankan law, property owners lose the right to property occupied by others for more than ten years, and the issue of secondary occupation remains extremely complicated. Rebuilding Muslim villages in areas where they were abandoned would be very costly.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the present justifiable focus of the government's and the humanitarian community's attention on the almost 300,000 persons displaced from the north during 2008-09, they should be taking measures so that the Muslims can either acquire local citizenship rights and fully integrate in Puttalam, or return to the north with conditions in place for their return to be sustainable.

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1. International Crisis Group, 'Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire', May 2007 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4868>

2. Cathrine Brun, 'Finding a Place: Local integration and protracted displacement in Sri Lanka', *Social Scientists Association*, 2008.

3. International Crisis Group, May 2007

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) works to provide assistance and protection to refugees and displaced people in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. [www.nrc.no/engindex.htm](http://www.nrc.no/engindex.htm)

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is part of NRC and is an international non-profit organisation that monitors internal displacement caused by conflicts. [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org)  
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