



Sri Lanka: on the edge of ending internal displacement?

by Rupasingha A Ariyaratne

Before Sri Lanka's twenty-year-old civil war ground to a halt following the February 2002 ceasefire between the government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), approximately 70,000 people were killed, over 750,000 were internally displaced and another 700,000 or so fled the country. In the absence of appreciable progress on the political front, a pall of scepticism overshadows the prospect of effecting speedy resettlement of those displaced during the armed conflict. The initial alacrity with which the displaced communities greeted the peace process is beginning to give way to more cautious optimism.

Over 230,000 IDPs have headed home in the north since the cease-fire. This means that, barring those who do not intend to return, another 500,000 remain to be resettled. The most daunting task is to resettle nearly

125,000 non-Tamil IDPs displaced from LTTE-controlled areas and some 50,000 Tamils from the military-held High Security Zones. By the end of June 2002, only 600 Sri Lankan refugees living in India had approached UNHCR for permission to be repatriated. There is even less interest shown by the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the possibilities of return.

There are formidable obstacles to resettlement, requiring joint effort on the part of the international community and the national authorities:

- **Absence of tangible proof of durable peace**

Though unfamiliar with the finer points of peace agreements, the displaced receive constant feedback on the state of the war and the cease-fire from sources such as the LTTE undercover operatives in the south, military personnel

placed at the security posts near the relief centres, NGO workers and civilians, particularly those in the northeastern border villages. Resulting fears of conditions in areas of return need to be allayed before the post-cessate-fire trickle of returnees can become a sustained flow.

- **Lack of mechanism to guarantee security, both en route and at the destination**

Physical security is vital to human existence, yet the IDPs' perceptions of security vary, depending on the nature of the causes of their flight. For instance, a person displaced as a result of being caught up in the cross-fire may settle for clear signs of an end to military hostilities as the minimum indicator of security needed to return, whereas the victims of 'ethnic cleansing' would additionally look for the convincing signs of a change in behaviour on the part of their former 'tormentors' as a precondition to return. The post-battle nervousness permeating the cadres of soldiers on the ground, reinforced by numerous 'grey' areas of responsibility for physical security, makes it even more hazardous for IDPs moving around the country.

- **Dispute over the issue of dismantling the military High Security Zones (HSZ)**

The LTTE demands the dismantling of HSZs in the Jaffna peninsula - a move rebuffed by the government on security grounds. Although the number of IDPs displaced from the current HSZs is relatively small (about 50,000), the issue of the HSZs has become a major stumbling block for implementing resettlement plans in general; IDPs know from past experience that even a minor tussle between the two main parties to the conflict may trigger a major conflagration. Both sides have apparently thought it prudent to sidestep the problem and have informally agreed on resettling people outside the security zones.

- **Inadequate protection from the risk of landmines and unexploded ordnance**

Demining must be prioritised as an essential precondition for implementing resettlement schemes. Reportedly, about one million landmines have been laid

Returnee fishermen in Point Pedro, Jaffna area, Sri Lanka

in the former war-zones, and only 10% of them were removed in 2002. IDP community leaders say that an international body like UNHCR or UNICEF ought to take responsibility for monitoring demining, with powers to declare any area which is not cleared of landmines unsuitable for resettlement.

■ **Lack of convincing evidence of sustainable conditions to support durable return and resettlement**

A combination of minimum infrastructural facilities, such as shelter, water and sanitation and a modest income, is needed to sustain a decent lifestyle. An ambitious plan is already underway to build new housing units and to repair/reconstruct damaged houses in the former war-affected areas. However, these would accommodate less than 25% of the existing IDP population. The package of resettlement cash allowance and dry food rations provided to resettling families is hardly adequate to persuade IDPs to leave the relief centres.

Even once physical resettlement occurs, IDPs would still be left to grapple with a number of issues:

■ **Land and property**

IDPs are naturally keen to obtain restitution or compensation in respect of lost land and property. Property disputes, however, are known to take an inordinately long time to solve and therefore IDPs

do not usually make land and property settlement a precondition for returning home. Property issues, however, can be even more difficult to resolve at that stage.

■ **Political volatility**

In the absence of a political settlement, and because of uncertainties of political legitimacy, disputes related to the conflict occur almost daily, sometimes provoking violent reactions from both sides. The fall-out from such squabbles invariably tends to dampen what little enthusiasm that IDPs feel on returning home and may upset the resettlement process.

■ **Disinclination to return**

Even under the best of conditions, and especially after a protracted period of displacement, some IDPs tend not to want to return. These 'stayees' are drawn from highly disparate groups, such as those who are fully or partially integrated with the host societies; have found employment opportunities; did not have land/property in the areas they fled from; have bought land/property in the south; have younger family members who have settled into city life; or are traumatised as victims of 'ethnic cleansing' practices.

■ **Reintegration support**

Reintegration usually marks the longest and, for all intents and purposes, the final stage in the

process of ending displacement. Judging by the Sri Lankan experience, the phenomenon of socio-economic integration is as complex as the causes of displacement. It requires international support, particularly in advocacy programmes and monitoring instances of human rights violations.

The spectre of displacement will cease to haunt the returnees as well as those who choose not to return only when the whole range of these issues is adequately dealt with through sustained national and international effort. While the international community has a vitally important contribution to make to overcome the **obstacles** outlined earlier, it should play only a peripheral role in dealing with the latter **issues**; the onus of their practical realisation should rest with the national authorities. However, it is not possible to fix a specific timeframe for ending international protection and turning responsibility entirely over to the national authorities, because the two sets of issues are inextricably intertwined and need to be addressed in tandem and in overlapping stages.

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