

# Obstacles to implementing the Guiding Principles in Sri Lanka

by Danesh Jayatilaka

*In 2001, prior to the current cessation of hostilities, the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies in Sri Lanka, in collaboration with UNHCR and the Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, embarked on a programme to operationalise the Guiding Principles in order to enhance protection and assistance for the estimated 0.8m IDPs in the north and east of the island.*

Methods used included advocacy work at central government level in Colombo, training workshops, leaflet/poster dissemination, formation of district monitoring working groups, consultations, listening to IDP focus groups and participatory evaluation assessments. When the project began there were 492 government-run IDP welfare camps across the island. One in three inhabitants of the Northern region was displaced.

Populations at risk have got used to pre-emptive flight, reacting to warnings of attacks to come and knowing from bitter experience the conditions to expect when fighting breaks out. For some Sri Lankans in the conflict-torn sector, flight has become as routine as making a pot of rice or cup of tea. Many have been coerced into relocation - the forceful eviction of the entire Muslim population from the North by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990 - or fled en masse when trapped between the government and LTTE. The average Sri Lankan IDP has been displaced at least five times. State, UN and non-governmental agencies may have provided assistance to mitigate the effects of conflict but have been unable to prevent displacements from happening in the first place.

By listening to the displaced, the project's researchers produced evidence that IDPs:

- are irked by frequent imposition of senseless and often counter-productive restrictions on movement: people feel trapped inside a cage and unable to access health, education, labour and livelihood opportunities
- constantly live in fear: threats of death, assault and torture are common and camp managers are frequently not informed of the fate of residents who have been detained
- are often too frightened to lodge complaints about human rights violations to the ICRC or the Human Rights Commission
- live in congested living quarters with resultant high rates of family breakup, extramarital affairs, incest, suicide and other traumas
- are vulnerable to having their children forcibly recruited by militias and home guards and especially by the LTTE for their child brigades
- from Sinhala villages in border areas are frequently attacked in reprisal and ethnic cleansing raids by the LTTE: the plight of the significantly large Sinhala IDP group goes largely unnoticed by the existing humanitarian structure
- are at considerable risk from the minefields planted by the army and the LTTE and from unexploded ordnance
- are inconvenienced by delivery delays, irregularities and diversion of food rations
- have to put up with water and sanitation facilities which are below Sphere minimum standards: toilets and hand pumps remain un-repaired and latrines are not pumped out due to lack of management and maintenance
- are discriminated against by the staff of government hospitals because of inadequate facilities and difficult working conditions faced by doctors and nurses
- are constrained from accessing services or passing through checkpoints by lack of documentation



- have been 'encouraged' to 'return' to areas not of their own choosing by reductions in welfare provision or intimidatory troop movements
- feel that dialogue initiated by government only pays lip service to participation and consultation.

In order to cease discrimination against IDPs on grounds of ethnicity or status, we need to:

- encourage a radical paradigm shift in attitude to promote transparency, information sharing and collaborative management and partnership between programme administrators and recipients
- stop preparing policies in haste
- do more to sensitise local populations to the problems faced by IDPs
- openly discuss how settlement projects affect the overall dynamics of the conflict in order that micro and macro perspectives feed into national systems and future policies
- give greater attention to meeting the particular needs of elderly and disabled IDPs
- do more to overcome procedural obstacles to providing IDPs with recognised documentation.

*Danesh Jayatilaka worked as the Project Coordinating Officer for Sri Lanka's Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies.*

*Web: [www.humanitarian-srilanka.org](http://www.humanitarian-srilanka.org)*

*Email: [idpguide@diamond.lanka.net](mailto:idpguide@diamond.lanka.net)  
[daneshj@hotmail.com](mailto:daneshj@hotmail.com)*