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## Sri Lanka plans to resettle refugees in six months

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By C. Bryson Hull COLOMBO (Reuters) - Sri Lanka plans to resettle most of the 280,000 refugees who fled the war with the defeated Tamil Tigers within six months, the government said on Thursday after meeting visiting Indian officials. Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and National Security Advisor M.K. Narayan met President Mahinda Rajapaksa, after Sri Lanka declared total victory in a 25-year war over the Tamil Tigers in which India's role has always loomed large. Sri Lanka said on Monday it had totally defeated the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), ending a war long viewed as unwinnable. During the relentless offensive, troops freed more than 280,000 civilians whom the United Nations had said the Tigers were holding as human shields. "The Government of Sri Lanka indicated that it was their intention to dismantle the relief camps at the earliest and outlined a 180-day plan to resettle the bulk of (refugees) to their original places of habitation," a joint statement said. The Tigers had said the government planned to hold people indefinitely in what it dubbed "concentration camps." Sri Lanka has said it needs to keep people inside the camps long enough to weed out potential Tiger infiltrators, and the United Nations has since said the camps meet international standards aside from the limited freedom of movement. India has always paid keen attention to the war because Sri Lankan Tamils have close ties to the 60 million Tamils who live in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and it has had to walk a delicate line in supporting the military campaign. India committed to provide assistance for demining, civil infrastructure and reconstruction of houses, the statement said. Sri Lanka also committed to begin implementing devolution of political power to Tamils as laid out in the 22-year-old Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, which India brokered four years after the first phase of the civil war erupted in 1983. "The government of Sri Lanka also intends to begin a broader dialogue with all parties including Tamil parties in the new circumstances, for further enhancement of political arrangements to bring about lasting peace and reconciliation," the statement said. Rajapaksa offered compromise and reconciliation to Tamils in his victory speech on Tuesday, in which he said the defeat of the LTTE should not be construed as a defeat of Tamils, and again on Thursday. In a statement on Thursday, he said: "Ensuring that the nation's outpouring of joy at the defeat of terrorism leaves no room for anyone's feelings to be hurt in any manner is the greatest tribute we can pay to our motherland." "Let us all stand together, strong and united in victory." The LTTE formed in the 1970s as Tamils turned to guerrilla violence to fight discrimination meted out by governments led by the Sinhalese majority, and the Tigers eventually took total control by violently wiping out competing groups. Tamils lost their favoured status under the British colonial government when it handed power over to the Sinhalese majority at independence in 1948. India at first armed and trained the LTTE, but later had its fingers burnt when the Tigers turned on Indian peacekeepers deployed in Sri Lanka from 1987-1990. (Editing by Bill Tarrant)Courtesy: uk.reuters.com