
IDP camps in good condition - UN envoy in Sri Lanka

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by Shanika SRIYANANDA Calling on the government to expedite moves for a speedy reconciliation with all ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) representative in Sri Lanka, Amin Awad said that the post-war milieu in the country is very promising and IDPs have a very bright future. Awad, a Sudanese national who has handled refugees in 11 countries, said that according to his experience with regard to IDPs, the camps in Vavuniya are in good condition and the humanitarian work being carried out is very satisfactory. While outlining the overall picture as to the facilities for the IDPs, Awad told the 'Sunday Observer' in an interview that one of the biggest challenges for Sri Lanka, is the rehabilitation of LTTE cadres. "Because this is the first time that a conventional Army has defeated a terror outfit and taken ex-terrorists for rehabilitation", he said. Excerpts of the interview: Q: According to UNHCR guidelines how do you describe the post-war situation with regard to Northern refugees? A: The post-war situation here looks very promising and it seems that there is a very bright future for the IDPs. I think, if the economic development begins it will augur well for the North is a region of resources. In the North West there is the Rice Bowl, and in the North there is the Jaffna Peninsula which has a huge potential for agriculture and fisheries. The most important factor is the consolidation of the livelihood of these IDPs after the restoration of community life. The livelihood empowerment is the number one priority. Q: What is your assessment of the present situation relating to refugees in the IDP centres? A: There are two categories of IDPs. One is the mass exodus of 300,000 people who came after the war in the North. There are another 360,000 IDPs who were already displaced before the current crisis started in October 2008. When the CFA was signed there were 700,000 to 800,000 people and after the CFA half of them went back. And now 360,000 are still there and we are not forgetting them as they also need assistance. According to statistics, there are over 260,295 IDPs in camps in Vavuniya. There are 434 in Mannar, 11,069 in Jaffna and 6, 697 in Trincomalee. The second batch of people that we are looking at is the Muslims who fell victim to the LTTE. As the government wants to resettle them, we are ready to provide help. These people need to go back to their own habitats. Q: How do you compare their living conditions among the other refugees in similar conflicts? A: I think according to my experience with regard to IDPs around the world the camps in Vavuniya are relatively in good condition. We had problems at the initial stages because the people in large numbers moved in at a very fast pace. We were behind schedule at the beginning and as of now the flow has stopped. We are working with the government on a de-congested plan to improve the facilities - sanitation and health of these people. The rainy season is coming in and we are preparing for that, especially to facilitate the people in flood prone areas. There is a rapid improvement and I am satisfied with the work that has been done so far. Q: Do you agree that these people, who were denied a decent life for decades, are enjoying life in the IDP camps? A: The most important factor is that the people have stopped experiencing horrors of the war. I must also say though they are happy, yet these people are eager to go back home. It is important because the government has to spend lots of money to maintain the good condition of these camps. Over 300,000 people need to be fed on daily basis apart from providing them facilities for bath, wash, education, health and various other aspects. So the best solution is to move them out as soon as possible. Q: There are accusations that there is no access for the INGOs and NGOs to these camps. The reason given by the government was that since there are LTTEers in the camps, it is not advisable to leave room for disruption of normalcy. Do you justify this limitation imposed on the aid workers? A: This limitation is because of the security concerns and also the other environmental concerns like the number of vehicles belonging to the aid agencies entering the camps. Earlier, the government was concerned about the number of vehicles entering the camps and we have now reached an agreement with the government to reduce the number of such vehicles. We agreed that it is not conducive for over 50 vehicles to be in. So, we are to share vehicles in a more organised manner. This arrangement will assist us in our daily work. We had problems, but we have solved them with the help of the government. Q: The UN agencies are part and parcel of this whole process. Are you satisfied with the coordination that you got from the government?

A: Yes, we have a good coordination with the government, the Competent Authority, Maj. Gen. G.A. Chandrasiri and Minister of Resettlement, Rishard Bathiudeen at a satisfactory level.

Q: What else do you expect the government to do for the welfare of these refugees? A: The overall aim would be to stabilize population and prepare for their return as soon as possible. Q: With regard to the INGOs and NGOs, Sri Lanka has bitter experiences when they were alleged to have assisted the LTTE terrorists. Your comments? A: As you said, these could be mere incidents. The relief agencies should remain impartial, open and transparent as well. If such incidents ever happen as isolated cases they should not affect the work being done by the humanitarian agencies in Sri Lanka for over 25 years. They did a very good job throughout their stay here. Q: Health, sanitation, clean water and shelter are the priorities in the humanitarian relief measures. Do you see any lapses in these areas? A: During the initial stages where over 300,000 people were heading at a very fast pace, there were issues of poor facilities. But now the conditions in the camps are improving. As far as health is concerned there is a vast improvement because the government has provided drugs and doctors and all other health facilities to these people. Water and sanitation were other main issues at the beginning, but now river water is being pumped to these camps. New latrines are to come up. Most of the existing issues will be solved once the de-congested plan to reduce overcrowding is fully implemented. Q: The government has set a target to resettle over 80 percent of the IDPs by end of this year. How realistic do you think this target is? A: The 180-day plan is good and it worked well in the East. It can be implemented in the North as well. So, it is better to start the program now itself to send back 80 percent of IDPs to their homes before end of this year. If the government implements this plan as soon as possible it would be a realistic target and there should not be more

delays. Most importantly, it is costly for the government to keep these people in camps for long. Q: According to international standards is there a time frame within which the IDPs have to be sheltered? A: Resettle them as soon as possible. Sooner, the better! In the East the government did it, and if they can do the same in the North, no such thing will happen. The UNHCR assisted some 640,000 IDPs to return to their respective areas of origin in the East. Q: The resettlement of the IDPs is the biggest task ahead. Are you satisfied with the resettlement work done in the East? A: That was a very successful program that we did. If we can apply the same in the North I think all of our problems would be solved. Q: What about the Sri Lankan refugees in India. Do you have any plans to bring them back? A: The government wants to bring them back and we have the mandate to ensure the safe return of these people. Q: What are the recommendations of the UNHCR to implement a successful resettlement program in the North? A: Make the IDPs return early, give them individual homes, ensure the restoration of services - sanitation, health, roads, electricity and livelihood. Foremost among them are the de-mining and clearance of unexploded objects. They are the major challenges the government, UNHCR and the international community face at the moment. Q: What do you have to say about the rehabilitation of the former LTTE cadres? A: That is one of the biggest challenges for Sri Lanka, because this is the situation arisen for the first time where a conventional Army of the State defeated a terror outfit and took terrorist surrendees for rehabilitation. Courtesy:sundayobserver.lk