Address by Minister Samarasinghe at the Adjournment Debate on IDP in Parliament

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Address by Hon Mahinda Samarasinghe MP,Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights,in Parliament on 22 July 2009 on the occasion of the Adjournment Debate on Internally Displaced Persons

Mr Speaker, I have returned this afternoon from a visit to Vavuniya – a visit that enabled me to see, at first hand, the conditions under which the internally displaced Sri Lankans are being housed and cared for by the Government. I must inform this House that what I saw and learned from the several parties that I talked to was the fact that conditions have improved since the critical period in the third week of May when the huge influx of people placed intense pressure on the ability and resources of the authorities to deal with the various needs of these persons. I am not, Mr Speaker, claiming that the situation in that area is ideal. Indeed as we move from a crisis phase into a care and maintenance operation and while we are focusing on creating the conditions that will permit an early return to their places of origin within the shortest space of time, the Government, assisted by its partners – both local and international – are working hard to ensure that the conditions in the Relief Villages and welfare centres are continuously improved and upgraded in keeping with global norms and standards. I must, at this point, emphasize that the IDP sites are a temporary measure to keep these people in safety and security until a process of sustainable return and resettlement can be ensured. However, this does not mean that we do not provide them with the maximum level of comfort and care that we can afford. Mr Speaker, we are quite definite in our view that conditions on the so-called welfare centres and relief villages can and must be improved. As I have said on numerous occasions, these persons are not a mere statistic to be discussed as an abstract problem. These are Sri Lankan citizens with all the expectations, hopes and dreams of a better tomorrow which has been made possible by the defeat of terrorism. We must not let those aspirations wither away for want of concentrated and concerted effort on our part. The Government of His Excellency the President is determined that, as far as possible, the shelter, water supply, sanitation, food, healthcare, education and other ancillary services must be provided in accordance with the identified needs of the people. I am particularly concerned that the so called protection needs, the right to personal safety and security and broad concerns of human rights, are adequately catered for. Keeping in mind that this a unique situation where a population of over 280,000 IDPs in Vavuniya, Jaffna, Mannar and Trincomalee Districts are being housed and cared for in the aftermath of a historic operation to rescue them from a ruthless terrorist organization, all necessary measures must be taken to ensure not only their welfare but also the welfare of the general populace of Sri Lanka in those areas and in the rest of the country. It is for this reason, Mr Speaker, that the freedom of movement of some of these IDPs has been restricted. We are not happy to do so nor are we totally inconsiderate of their rights. We are well aware that some cadres of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have infiltrated the ranks of the IDPs and, until and unless those cadres are filtered out, we have no option but to keep them within the welfare centres and relief villages. However, Mr Speaker, we have taken measures where possible to release some persons having duly considered their needs and the exigencies of their personal circumstances. Therefore over 9,000 persons children, elderly, pregnant mothers, mothers with very young children and the disabled have been released on a gradual basis after a thorough check as to their bona fides was carried out. It is our expectation that those who can be released, will be released in the days to come. Another 14,000 people constituting over 5,000 families have benefited from the efforts made at reunification. Persons who flooded out of the no-fire zone were sometimes separated from their families and ended up at different locations. These persons are now being reunited with their immediate family members and are able to take comfort in the company of their loved ones. The Government has no wish to add to the trauma of these persons who have managed to escape a conflict during which they were held hostage by the LTTE. The process of reunification is ongoing. In pursuance of my Ministry’s role in the protection sector both from a disaster management and a human rights perspective, we have taken the lead in forming a protection working group in Colombo to discuss and take measures to alleviate the situation of the IDPs. We have invited the United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator and the Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to join key Government stakeholders in sharing experiences and evolving solutions to the problems they face. One such outcome is the strengthening of the Community Service Centres in the Relief Villages on the basis that there is one Community Centre to service approximately 5,000 IDPs. This is a measure that we mooted and one that was fleshed out by my Ministry working in close cooperation with the Ministry of Child Development and Women’s Empowerment, civil society and UNHCR. We hope that a range of services can be made available to cater to the needs of the IDPs though counseling services, women’s and children’s desks, a desk of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition and the like. The Centres we expect will become “one-stop shops” where several of the requirements of the IDPs will be supplied. In this context, Mr Speaker, I have facilitated a dialogue between the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka and the UN System and the Vavuniya office of the Commission will be strengthened in order to improve their capacity to respond to protection issues. Initially for a period of six months, the Commission’s regional office will be supported to undertake visits and to talk to IDPs with a view to identifying and resolving their grievances. It is my opinion Mr Speaker that an independent national institution such as the Human Rights Commission will be the most suitable organization to play this vital role in caring for the IDP population in the Relief Villages. The IDPs, like any other group of citizens, have the right to receive information as to the Government’s various services that are provided or available to them. I am pleased to inform this House that we plan to put up several information points where vital information is provided to the IDPs. This is a very important measure that will greatly assist the IDPs to access the range of services that are being increasingly made available to them by the Government. A lot of the incidents reported stem from the overcrowding and congestion of persons in a confined space. Inevitably this will lead to complaints of abuse and lack of adequate protection. You will be pleased, Mr Speaker, to note that the Competent Authority for Internally Displaced Persons has taken the initiative to establish

smaller satellite villages of approximately 5,000 persons each which helps ease the congestion in the larger Relief Villages. This has several other beneficial results. One is that camp management for a much smaller number of persons becomes much more practicable and another is that service delivery and the provision of facilities becomes much easier. Already 4 of these satellite villages have been established and we expect that this initiative will continue in the future. Mr Speaker, There have been several untruths published with regard to the IDPs and their situation. This is especially the case in relation to one foreign newspaper which has consistently exaggerated the situation in order to paint the worst possible picture of the plight of IDPs. For instance, 10 days ago this newspaper carried an article which stated that: “About 1,400 people are dying every week at the giant Manik Farm internment camp set up in Sri Lanka to detain Tamil refugees from the nation’s bloody civil war”. Such provocative and blatantly false language is a crass attempt to sling mud at the Government of His Excellency the President. Mr Speaker, I can tell you, and through you the Hon Members of this House, that the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition is closely monitoring the health situation and has reported only 163 deaths in the first two weeks of this month. These figures are high but are well below danger line identified by the SPHERE guidelines for comparable humanitarian situations for the South Asian sub-region. The Disaster Preparedness and Response Unit of the Ministry of Health is mapping out the causes of death and we should be able to bring down the mortality rate still further through better targeted health service provision. It is best left to the imagination to find reasons why such untruths are being bandied about by the foreign media. As my Ministry also enjoys a coordination mandate we have, from very early in the conflict, facilitated discussion between key Government focal points, international organizations and our bilateral partners with a view to overcoming the several challenges we face together in providing humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict. Mr Speaker, I chair the Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (the CCHA) which brings together all these parties and where we are able to jointly identify challenges and gaps and bring our collective efforts to bear on resolving any difficulties. Moreover, I have instructed the officials of the Disaster Management Centre, which comes under the purview of my Ministry, to strengthen its operational presence in Vavuniya to better coordinate the provision of humanitarian assistance by working closely with the Government, international organizations, national and international non-governmental organizations and the available local government institutions. We have, through this initiative, identified a potential hazard of flooding in the several zones during the upcoming rainy season and have taken steps to commence the construction of drainage systems to prevent and mitigate this risk. We will work closely with all our partners to enhance preparedness and develop mitigatory measures and responses to any foreseeable hazard. Mr Speaker, I have highlighted just a handful of measures among the many others to illustrate the Government’s commitment to continuously care for IDPs and to seek to improve their living conditions. Many of my ministerial colleagues have visited the IDP sites and have taken a wide range of measures to address the many issues that are bound to crop up in complex situations of this nature. We still need to work on providing better temporary shelters, more and better quality sanitation facilities, we need to focus on education and care for women and children – two very vulnerable groups – provision of psycho social assistance, open recreational spaces and many more relief measures. We are approaching these challenges in a structured and scientific manner. Looking ahead, Mr Speaker, we are working hard to resettle the bulk of IDPs by the end of the year. This resettlement must happen within the context of the “Wadakkin Wasantham” programme. There are several stages which have to be gone through before we can confidently state that we have achieved all the targets that His Excellency President Rajapakse has set his Government. De-mining, ensuring of security and law and order in the North, development of physical infrastructure, restoration of damaged public and private buildings, facilitation of voluntary returns, renewal of social infrastructure and a sense of community and, finally, the resuscitation and re-establishment of democratic institutions truly representative of the people and their legitimate interests and aspirations. Our colleague, the Hon. Basil Rajapakse MP, is working tirelessly to fulfil these responsibilities in his capacity as Chair of the Presidential Task Force for Resettlement, Development and Security in the Northern Province. He is ably assisted by Honourable Minister Rishad Bathiudeen who is also working very hard. I believe every one of us, in Government and outside, needs to give them our unstinting support and cooperation to ensure the success of this truly national endeavour. It is when these are all achieved that we can confidently state that we have overcome the post-conflict challenges to add lustre to the tremendous military victory achieved over the forces of terrorism. An enduring and stable peace based on universal values of mutual respect, coexistence and brotherhood is the best tribute we can pay to the memory of the many who have made the supreme sacrifice for our motherland – Sri Lanka. I thank you, Mr Speaker. [Ends]