## More Indians in Sri Lanka to clear landmines

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NEW DELHI: Some 80 former Indian soldiers have left for Sri Lanka to join the Indians who are already there clearing thousands of buried landmines. The new group has teamed up with their compatriots working in Sri Lanka since 2003, mainly in the northern districts of Mannar and Vavuniya, in defusing mines laid by both the Sri Lankan military and the Tigers during their prolonged conflict.

While 50 of the latest batch of Indians are attached to the Pune-based Horizon Group, 32 are from Sarvatra Technical Consultants, a company that is based in Gurgaon, Haryana. Both are led by retired Indian Army officers who are proud of what they have achieved so far and are keen to help Sri Lanka now that it is engaged in post-war construction. "It has been a wonderful opportunity," Horizon chief and retired Major General Shashikant Pitre told IANS over telephone from Pune, referring to the de-mining work. "We are happy that we have been able to contribute to the building of Sri Lanka," added retired Major General Prem K. Puri, the director (operations) of Sarvatra. Both Pitre and Puri said that senior presidential advisor Basil Rajapaksa had said he was happy with the work the Indians were doing. The Sri Lankan military is also defusing mines in a big way. Besides Mannar and Vavuniya, the Indian companies also cleared mines in Batticaloa in the east. Horizon also worked in the neighbouring districts of Trincomalee and Amparai. All de-mining is done under the care of the National Steering Committee, a government body in Colombo. After Sri Lanka crushed the LTTE in May this year, the Indian government also decided to provide separate funds to Horizon and Sarvatra as part of stepped up aid to Sri Lanka. The 82 Indians who will be coming to Sri Lanka are an outcome of Indian funding. Both Indian companies have shared their skills with Sri Lankans they have employed over the years. It wasn't easy though when it all began. "There were lots of problems in the beginning," said Puri, referring to the 2003 period when the Norway-sponsored ceasefire brought a semblance of peace to Sri Lanka. The LTTE then effectively controlled the northeast. "LTTE was initially suspicious. It wanted to know why (retired) Indian Army people were in Sri Lanka," he said. The suspicion arose from months of fighting between the LTTE and the Indian Army in Sri Lanka's northeast between 1987 and 1990. According to Pitre, it will take one-and-a-half to two years to do away with most landmines and another year to declare the areas safe for habitation. "From a distance it might seem as if we are working slowly. That is not so. We have to clear every bit of land carefully, inch by inch. It is a meticulous operation," Pitre said.(IANS) Courtesy: dailymirror.lk

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