
Sri Lanka recalls service of Humanitarian workers with gratitude

Friday, 21 August 2009

Last Updated Friday, 21 August 2009

Sri Lanka to enable IDPs to resume their normal lives within the shortest possible space of time Statement by Hon Mahinda Samarasinghe MP, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights on the occasion of the Adjournment Debate on the Situation in Internally Displaced Person's Camps in Vavuniya Parliament of Sri Lanka, Sri Jayawardenepura-Kotte Wednesday, 19 August 2009

Mr Speaker, Today, 19 August 2009, marks the commemoration of the first ever World Humanitarian Day. Last December, the United Nations General Assembly decided to commemorate this day to coincide with the death, six years ago of the then Special Representative of the UN Secretary General to Iraq and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sérgio Vieira de Mello. He, along with 21 of his colleagues, tragically lost their lives in the massive Canal Hotel bomb explosion in Baghdad, Iraq. Unfortunately, before that incident and since then, there have been several other incidents in several parts of the world where humanitarian workers have been harmed or killed. Today we recall their service with gratitude and collectively, as a global community, pay tribute to their memory. Mr Speaker, Sri Lanka has emerged into the light after more than 25 years of battling terrorism. The decisive victory gained on the battlefield has thrown up new challenges. Chief amongst these is the provision of humanitarian supplies and services to the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who were rescued from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the humanitarian operations which concluded in May 2009. Our eventual goal is their resettlement in the areas which they originally resided. This process requires ensuring that the areas of return must be safe, free of mines and other unexploded ordnance (UXO) which could cause immeasurable harm if not cleared. These are challenges that the Government of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapakse has taken on and we are determined to overcome them. This process of resettlement, reconstruction, development, and national reconciliation, Mr Speaker, should result in a society and a nation in which everyone is able to enjoy the full gamut of rights that are enshrined in the Chapter on Fundamental Rights in the Constitution. Everyone should feel equal to one another and the postulates of equality in the Constitutional document should not be confined to mere words on paper but must be made a practical reality. In ensuring this equality of status, treatment and opportunity we must nurture and celebrate the wonderfully rich diversity that characterizes Sri Lankan society. Our country's multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious makeup must be maintained in order that everyone can play an active and productive part in the process of national reconciliation initiated by His Excellency the President. It is when this new Sri Lanka is created that we can genuinely claim that we have overcome the many challenges we are faced with. Mr. Speaker, Nearly a month ago, on 22 July I had occasion to address this House on a similar theme during an Adjournment Debate dealing with the situation of IDPs. On that day, I detailed the various measures that the Government was taking in cooperation with its national and international partners to care for the people in welfare centres and relief villages. I noted then that the situation was not ideal but pointed out that there had been a gradual improvement in conditions since the month of May. Today's debate, Mr. Speaker, is more focused as the motion moved by our Hon colleague concentrates on the situation caused by the recent rains and the fears of flooding and attendant health risks. We anticipated that the impending rains could cause conditions in the camps to deteriorate and I directed the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), which comes under the purview of my Ministry, to evolve a strategy together with the other operational agencies working in the Chettikulam area to deal with the threat of inundation. To facilitate this we used the mechanism of the National Disaster Management Coordination Committee (NDMCC) which is the coordination structure for all government, non-government and private organizations working on disaster management related areas. The NDMCC has developed collaborative programmes between member organizations in order to harness the synergies of different organizations to manage disasters effectively and efficiently. The NDMCC is operational since November 2007 and has a membership of over seventy government, non-government and private organizations. The wealth of experience and resources available in the members of NDMCC are being used strategically to find sustainable solutions for the humanitarian and development issues faced by the IDPs. Mr Speaker, I can report that we have made substantial progress in preventing and/or mitigating the risk of flooding in the camps in the Menik Farm area. In accordance with decisions taken to date the Disaster Management Centre's Disaster Risk Management programme assisted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) will bear the costs of developing contour maps for all IDP zones while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will support initiatives related to drainage system development. The project will be implemented in two stages to minimize the delays that could occur between the planning and implementation periods. Under the first phase, the drainage systems of the zones 01, 03 and 04 will be developed. The Sri Lanka Reclamation and Development Corporation has undertaken the construction of drains in Zones 1 and 3. The local road development division (RDD) is working in zone 4. Rainwater disposal system is scheduled to be completed by 15 September. The DMC has undertaken to develop the drainage system in Zone 02 in collaboration with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) based the contour maps developed by the Survey Department. At present, this initiative is ongoing to construct the system in Zone 2. I have received reports to the effect that Over 50% of the work is completed. Under the second phase of the project, the drainage systems of zones 05, 06A, 06B, Dharmapuram, Veerapuram and Sunethipuram will be developed. The different phases of the project were designed considering the potential severity of the drainage issue and the size of the population living in respective zones. The zones with large populations and potentially severe drainage issues were included in the first phase of the project. Based on the reports I have received we have ever confidence that a much improved rainwater disposal system will be available by 15 September. As of last evening, I have received reports from the DMC to the effect that there is no stagnation of rainwater inside the camps. I repeat that there is no large-scale flooding and as I have said earlier, construction work is ongoing to improve the conditions. Anticipating problems connected with sewerage disposal which could be encountered during the rainy season we have taken steps to address

this issue as well. We took measures to prevent the risk of collapsing walls of septic tanks due to horizontal forces after heavy rain. This could result in adverse environmental impacts. The DMC coordinated the visit of consultants to these sites and several remedial actions were made. The DMC coordinated with the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) to introduce a suitable waste management plan that can be executed during the forthcoming rainy season. A team of CEA officials were accompanied by officers from the DMC and the UNDP and visited IDP settlements in Vavuniya from 12 to 14 August 2009. Steps have also been taken to initiate a hospital waste disposal system for the Menik Farm area and we expect that a project proposal will be submitted by CEA in the near future. Moving on to the health issue, Mr Speaker, I am informed by the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition that the moderate rain that occurred last week has not resulted in any major health or health related issues. None of the health centres were affected and all centres are functioning at normal capacity. Health personnel are supplied with adequate protective clothing and are actively working. The communicable disease situation is monitored closely and, so far, there is no reported increase of any communicable disease. The Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition took proactive steps to establish a specialized unit to monitor and coordinate health supplies and service delivery some time ago. They report that measures are underway to strengthen the roofing of the existing health facilities and ensure provision of appropriate and adequate drug storing facilities. With regard to disease control, the existing communicable disease surveillance system is geared to monitor the communicable disease situation closely in order to prevent epidemics. Vector surveillance activities will be commenced immediately by entomological teams and there will be a further strengthening of the fly control measures and develop a mechanism to improve supervision of garbage disposal and removal. The Ministry has also made recommendations in respect of preparation for the anticipated rains which include identification of alternative accommodation for people in flood prone areas, especially for the elderly and disabled, to keep a stock of extra tents ready and the need for cementing the floors of the existing shelters. In order to maintain quality standards in water and sanitation, it is necessary to strengthen the existing system which supervise water and sanitation with the support of the PHIs, increase the number of permanent and temporary latrines in every zone, to augment the water purification system by distributing chlorine tablets to households and to water storage facilities, to strengthen laboratory facilities at Vavuniya for testing of water quality and to carry out super chlorination during floods. I am going into this much detail to demonstrate very clearly to Hon Members that the Government is taking its responsibility to care for these displaced Sri Lankans very seriously. We are looking into every small issue and are taking measures in advance to address problems before they can arise. Mr Speaker, Other activities to assist and support IDPs are proceeding at a rapid pace. We have completed registration of 144,000 persons. 100,000 identity cards have been issued to the Police for distribution and 75,000 cards have reached the intended recipients. I am also happy to inform this House that we have managed to ensure the construction of 112 child friendly spaces in the camps. These are especially necessary to enable children to have some space to relax and interact. We have also taken steps to create service protection centres on the basis of one for every 5,000 IDPs to enable them to access the range of services that are made available by the Government. We have taken steps to release approximately 9,000 persons including the elderly, pregnant women and lactating mothers and children. We have also been able to resettle 4,500 persons from camps in Vavuniya in Jaffna, Trincomalee, Kantale and Batticaloa. These processes are ongoing. Mr Speaker, We are not only looking at the short term provision of care and assistance. In support of the Wadakkini Wasantham (Northern Spring) initiative of His Excellency the President, my Ministry has, after wide consultation, just completed a national framework proposal on the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life. This proposal takes a holistic view of reintegration which includes not only disarmament and demobilization followed by rehabilitation but also transitional justice, reinsertion and socio-economic integration. This process will enable those who took part in the conflict to rebuild their lives and become productive members of society. We are in the process of formulating an action plan in keeping with the national framework in close consultation and coordination with the various Government focal points. We stand ready to assist the various Government agencies with mobilization of donor funding to assist in implementation if such a requirement arises. We have also put in place a strategy of Confidence Building and Stabilization Measures which will sustain and help the resettlement process now being carried out under the aegis of the Hon Basil Rajapakse, Chairman of the Presidential Task Force for Resettlement, Development and Security in the Northern Province, with the support of Hon Minister Rishad Bathiudeen. In the medium term, my Ministry is drafting a National Action Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights that will also include a thematic component on IDPs rights among other critically important areas. As I said earlier, all our efforts must fit in under the larger umbrella of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapakse's inclusive national reconciliation process which involves all political parties. Our efforts must all buttress and contribute to that overall national exercise which is of critical importance to the future of our Sri Lankan nation. In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I must reassure you, and through you the Hon Members of this House and the people of this country, that with regard to the IDPs in Vavuniya and elsewhere we are acutely conscious that these are Sri Lankans who have every expectation that the Government will care for them and enable them to resume their normal lives within the shortest possible space of time. This is a task that we have undertaken and it is one we are confident of overcoming. Thank you.