# Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe addresses the Executive Committee of the UN HCR in Geneva

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Hon. Mahinda Samarasinghe, M.P, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights addressed the 60th Session of the Executive Committee of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the Palais des Nations in Geneva today. Hon. Samarasinghe is among a large number of dignitaries, including Ministers, to address this forum which began its 5-day session today in Geneva. Prior to his address, Hon. Minister also met with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Mr. Antonio Guterres. The full text of Hon. Minister’s statement is as follows:
“Mr Chairman,It is a pleasure and a privilege for me to address this Plenary Session of the 60th session of the UNHCR Executive Committee given the close and excellent levels of cooperation between UNHCR and Sri Lanka, especially in the context of the assistance being provided to internally displaced persons (IDPs) at present, we wish to reiterate our intense and abiding interest in the activities of the UNHCR. I must also, in particular, acknowledge the constant interest in Sri Lanka, shown by High Commissioner Gutteres, whom I have been able to brief, during several meetings during the past twelve months, with regard to the evolving situation in Sri Lanka. I am happy to note that the situation, especially with regard to IDPs, has indicated a steadily improving scenario with not only recent conflict-related IDPs being focused upon, but also the needs of long-term IDPs in a situation of displacement of nearly twenty years due to conflict, being given due attention. I must stress that the Government’s efforts in this connection have been supported and supplemented throughout by UNHCR.  Hon. Minister meeting with Mr. Antonio Guterres UN High Commissioner for Refugees The aims and objectives of the Government of Sri Lanka with regard to Sri Lankan IDPs can be encapsulated in the following terms as expressed by Sri Lanka’s Prime Minister in his address to the UN General Assembly in New York just two days ago on 26 September. He said: “With the defeat of the LTTE in May this year, approximately 290,000 civilians in the Vanni region were liberated from the decades - long hold of the LTTE. One of our highest priorities thereafter has been to meet the immediate humanitarian needs of these displaced civilians, and to ensure their long-term safe, voluntary and dignified return to their homes. The welfare of our people at present in temporary transit sites must keep up with standards that meet our own high expectations as well as accepted international norms. This task has been facilitated by the assistance we receive from UN agencies, international and local civil society partners and donors.”  Mr Chairman,  The Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs, Professor Walter Kälin was in Sri Lanka for a three day visit which concluded over the weekend. He was able to observe, at first hand, the conditions in the welfare villages and the preparations for accelerated resettlement in Mannar District including de-mining and restoration of vital infrastructure that will sustain and stabilize resettlement and return. Professor Kälin is one international partner of Sri Lanka who has forged a constructive relationship with the country based on open dialogue and frank acknowledgement of the positives as well as the shortcomings that need to be remedied. We welcome such engagement and the sharing of best practice by international experts so that we, as a Government, can develop and fine-tune our responses to challenges that we are called upon to face. We have taken serious note of the concerns expressed by Professor Kälin and other friends and partners relating to the conditions in the camps, the issues surrounding freedom of movement and other protection issues.  Mr Chairman,  With the defeat of terrorism, the Government of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapakse is doing its utmost to reconstruct the foundations of a peaceful, democratic social order throughout the territory of the Sri Lankan nation.  Reconciliation and development form an integral part of this exercise. Key to the success of the overall initiative is the treatment and eventual resettlement and return of IDPs who are among the worst affected by the conflict. As the Minister in charge of Disaster Management, I view the return to normal life of these persons as critical in terms of prevention and mitigation of potential future conflict. Terrorism and civil strife are among the worst man-made disasters. This is why we place such great emphasis on a comprehensive plan to redevelop infrastructure in war affected areas and ensure that these areas are safe and secure prior to resettling persons. We are aware that there are trained and formerly active members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam among the IDPs. Those who have identified themselves and have given themselves up are being housed in special rehabilitation centres and a separate office was created – that of the Commissioner-General for Rehabilitation – to cater to their rehabilitation. My Ministry has taken the initiative to put together an all encompassing policy framework which will take a broad view of social and economic reintegration of ex-combatants. Action plans are being developed by national stakeholders and will be formally adopted later this week to actualize this policy framework. We have worked closely with ILO and UNDP in this initiative. These ex-combatants too will have the opportunity to become full and productive partners in building the new Sri Lanka envisioned by President Rajapakse.  Mr Chairman,  As I mentioned there are still some persons among the IDPs who have not disclosed their former affiliation with the LTTE. These persons pose a risk not only to the IDPs with whom they are intermingled but, if released, can cause destabilization and chaos amongst civilians elsewhere in the country. It is for this reason that we have been very careful about releases and permitting full freedom of movement. The Government of Sri Lanka has a responsibility to guarantee the human rights of the entirety of the Sri Lankan population – not only the rights of the IDPs. Allowing LTTE cadres, masquerading as ordinary displaced civilians, freedom of movement could pose a grave threat to people in the rest of the country. The global community knows only too well the atrocities committed by the LTTE against civilian populations. Given the sizeable stores of arms, ammunition and explosives being recovered on a daily basis in the former theatre of conflict and outside that area, the ability of the remnants of the LTTE to carry out indiscriminate acts of terrorism must not be underestimated.  This does not mean that attempts to characterize the welfare centres and relief villages as “internment camps” are in any way justified. Limited freedom of movement has been permitted and with the completion of screening, registration and profiling of IDPs, greater freedom of movement would be gradually

ensured. Notwithstanding the foregoing, Mr Chairman, we have released certain categories of persons and plans are under way to invite more persons among the general public to come forward and take care of IDPs. Indeed, advertisements have been placed in national newspapers, especially Tamil Language newspapers, inviting suitable persons to apply to host IDPs. The first round resulted in approximately 2,000 applications which are being processed and more notifications, including within the welfare centres and relief villages, will follow. More than 23,000 persons have been released for return and resettlement in Jaffna, Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Vavuniya and Mannar Districts. A further 9,000 persons belonging to special categories have been handed over to persons or institutions that will care for them. These include orphaned children, members of the clergy and their family members, persons over 60 years of age, university students, public servants and their families, pregnant women and disabled persons. We have undertaken to return or resettle the bulk of the IDPs by 31st January commensurating with the 180 day programme for re-settlement. The authorities in charge of maintaining the camps have also put in place a system of day-passes whereby IDPs who need to attend to specific wants, ranging from attending a family wedding to visiting their bank in a nearby town, can leave the camps for a limited period of time. Furthermore, “go and see visits” are being organized for the rest of the IDPs to ensure that eventual return and resettlement is voluntary and based on an informed choice. This, Mr Chairman, is not typical of the treatment of persons in so-called internment camps. Mr Chairman, The return and resettlement programme can only be completed when demining can be completed and we expect to be able to report on major advances in this area during the coming weeks. The acquisition of 10 new flailing machines, using Government funds will enable us to clear much more ground and obtain necessary certification from the United Nations agencies concerned. According to the initial survey carried out by the Information Management System on Mine Action, it is estimated that approximately 1.5 million landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) contaminate an area of 402 sq km. Since the beginning of January 2009, de-mining of 25 small administrative divisions has been completed. According to the National Steering Committee on Mine Action, de-mining in 15 divisions in Musali, Manthai West and the Rice bowl area of Mannar covering 80 sqkm have commenced and clearance is on-going. De-mining of the Rice bowl area is expected to be complete by Mid-October to enable further resettlement. In the District Vavuniya, 35 divisions have already been cleared and are ready for the resettlement of IDPs. De-mining activities in another 10 divisions is ongoing. In Jaffna, de-mining in 14 divisions has been completed with de-mining activities in a further 19 divisions ongoing. While de-mining in 03 divisions in Batticaloa and 01 division in Trincomalee has been completed, clearance activities are ongoing in another 02 divisions each in Anuradhapura, Batticaloa and Trincomalee Districts. As at the end of August, a total of 445,370,401 square meters have been cleared of mines and UXOs. Approximately US$ 64 million has been allocated for the Sri Lankan Mine Action Programme through the respective de-mining agencies. Of the area cleared, a total of 335,927,614 square meters have been cleared by the Sri Lanka Army at the cost of only US$10 million. The rest of the area has been cleared by other de-mining agencies. Apart from de-mining, resettlement can only be sustainable if livelihoods and other early recovery measures are put in place. The smooth transition from early recovery to medium and longer-term economic development is also being planned for. This long term development strategy is being developed and implemented under a programme known as the “Northern Spring” which will usher in a period of renewal for the people of the North. Mr Chairman, Let me briefly outline the conditions in the welfare centres and relief villages – especially in light of the recent measures we have taken to improve services and to minimize the potential hazard of inundation due to the impending rainy season. The Disaster Management Centre of Sri Lanka, which functions under the purview of my Ministry, has led coordination efforts to construct and de-silt storm water and other surface drains. Many international and national stakeholders have been co-opted into this effort. As at 21 September, the drainage work is nearing completion in most of the zones. Evaluation of the machinery and manpower needed for maintenance of the drainage system during the next three months and the conduct of awareness raising among IDPs on drainage and safety is our next priority. In Zone 00 – De-silting of side drains and surface drains within blocks are being completed. Regional authorities are being tasked with maintenance of drainage systems. Zone 01 shows a completion rate of 95% with de-silting of side drains and drainage maintenance to be done by regional authorities. Drainage in Zone 02 is 100% completed and Zones 03, 04 and 05 show progress of 80%, 75% and 80%, respectively. The drainage plan is finalized in respect of Zone 06A and 06B and work has just started. Work has just commenced in Zone 07 and 08 and also in Weerapuram. The areas known as Dharmapuram and Sumathipuram shows approximately 50% work done. Plans are being discussed to recruit IDPs to assist in the construction of surface drains. UNDP and UNOCHA in particular have supported our efforts in this regard. Health is another key focus area. This priority sector has been serviced by a special unit – the Disaster Preparedness and Response Division (DPRD) of the Ministry of Health since March 2009. At present, a total of 81 doctors are working in camps in Vavuniya and 18 doctors are working in the Cheddikulam hospital close to the main relief village site known as Menik Farm. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition has ensured that, permanent appointments have been made for approximately 100 doctors to serve in camps and 28 doctors to serve at the Cheddikulam hospital. A health camp which included psychosocial services was facilitated by the Sri Lanka Air Force in Zones 02 and 03. A new psychosocial Centre has been opened in Zone 04. Mobile clinic facilities are operational in the newly opened Zone 06. 07 health facilities in Kilinochchi, 03 in Mannar and 02 in Vavuniya are to be completed by mid-October 2009. 10 days ago, the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition in partnership with UNFPA and the Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka opened several family health clinics in Menik Farm that will provide antenatal and postnatal exams, voluntary family planning, emergency deliveries by skilled birth attendants and psychosocial counselling, among other services. The family health clinics will play a critical role in safeguarding the health of pregnant women in the camps. The Ministry reports that mortality rates have been gradually brought down. Mortality rates at the welfare villages at present are estimated at an average of two to three per cent which is compatible with mortality rates in any other part of the country and infectious diseases including diarrhoea, dysentery, chickenpox, measles, typhoid and hepatitis B which had increased during the rains experienced some weeks

after the mass IDP influx have been brought under control with the prompt healthcare, water and sanitation facilities provided by the Ministry in cooperation with national and international partners.  Education is another priority for Sri Lankans, Mr Chairman, whether they are displaced or not. In recognition of the importance placed on education, the national Examinations Department established 10 special examination centres in Vavuniya for 1,236 displaced candidates to enable them to sit the G.C.E Advanced Level examination which enables them to qualify for entry to University. It is significant that 166 ex-child combatants also sat for the examination held last month. Temporary learning spaces have been demarcated in the IDP sites and educational services are being provided with the complementary assistance of UNICEF and others.  UNHCR has been providing excellent support to the Government of Sri Lanka as head of the shelter and protection clusters and as a partner of key Government focal points including my Ministry. We have sought to establish a closer dialogue on protection issues and the provision of information to IDPs on the services available to them. My Ministry has worked with UNHCR to develop a structured programme of Confidence Building and Stabilization Measures (CBSM). The important role CBSM has played in the return process in the East has been widely acknowledged through identifying ways and means to address concerns of returning communities and contributing to the sustainability of return. I wish to emphasize the significant roles the Civil Military Liaison arrangements and the District Level Steering Committees have played in providing a forum for returnees to raise their concerns with local authorities and identify solutions. It is our expectation that CBSM will play a similarly important role in the resettlement process in the North. Compensation and restitution are also key issues in the context of IDPs and also forms a component of CBSM. UNHCR has also helped the Government to focus attention on a longstanding issue of protracted IDPs. Professor Kälin gave of his expertise in successfully conducting a National Consultation on protracted cases of displacement last year. These IDPs, including Muslims who were expelled from the Northern Province by the LTTE 20 years ago, pose a challenge due to the complexity of their situation having been in a situation of displacement, in some cases for 15 to 20 years. We will take a fresh look at these persons and seek to bring them within the Government’s programme of resettlement, reconciliation, reconstruction and reintegration.  All our efforts will be put at risk, Mr Chairman, if we do not look to a process of national healing and reconciliation and political accommodation of all Sri Lankans within a unified democratic framework. A multi-party Committee on Development and Reconciliation has been convened by President Rajapakse to address these issues.  The forum reflects the Government’s commitment to a pluralistic and inclusive approach in addressing post-conflict challenges. With the gradual restoration of democracy and the resuscitation of institutions of representative democracy as we have seen in the East and now in the North, our deliberations will set in motion a home-grown process aimed at ensuring long term stability.  Internal conflict, such as that experienced by Sri Lanka for nearly 3 decades, has an inevitable corrosive effect on the institutions and mechanisms that ensure peace, order and good governance. We have to rebuild our institutional foundations to foster and preserve the new multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious Sri Lanka that we wish to create. Our vision is the creation of a new Sri Lankan identity which acknowledges and cherishes the wonderful diversity that characterizes our society. To enable this, the promotion and protection of human rights – economic, social and cultural as well as civil and political rights and the right to development – is of prime importance. While our immediate focus is the care and protection of those immediately affected by the conflict – IDPs, the war wounded and the families of casualties, we are working towards the achievement of this long-term goal of creating a new nation in which all persons can live free, equal and with realistic hope for a better tomorrow. I am certain that all our friends and partners will join us and support us in this endeavour.  I thank you for your kind attention. [Ends]”  Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United NationsGeneva28 September 2009