

Minister Bogollagama states Government plans to settle all IDPs by January 2010

Thursday, 05 November 2009

Last Updated Friday, 06 November 2009

Excellencies,

I am pleased to address you this morning as part of my regular briefings to the Diplomatic Corps. At today's meeting I wish to focus on the progress made by the Government of Sri Lanka in resettling the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who fled from the cruel clutches of the LTTE during the various phases of the Government's humanitarian operations and demining activities.

The Internally Displaced Persons became a special community in the Sri Lankan society since the early eighties, not because of natural calamities but due to terrorism. It was to address the issues concerned with the IDPs that the Government of Sri Lanka established the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services in 2006 and the Resettlement Authority in 2007. You may recall that the Government of Sri Lanka was able to resettle 90% of the nearly 187,000 IDPs from the Eastern Province within a year. The Government began this process from 2006 which came to a close in the Eastern Province in October this year, when the resettlement process was formally completed under the Eastern Re-awakening's project or the 'Naganehira Navadhaya'. However, the challenges the Government encountered with the IDPs following the defeat of the LTTE was of a different magnitude. The mass departure of approximately 288,000 that resulted from our humanitarian operations, culminating with the defeat of the LTTE on 18th May 2009, resulted in an unprecedented challenge to the Government of Sri Lanka. Despite the large numbers, the Government was able to ensure that each and every person who was accommodated at the welfare villages was provided with food, shelter and medical care. Arrangements were also made to ensure that the children continued their education and even sat for the GCE O/Level and A/Level examinations. The Government also had in place basic facilities such as banks, shops and vocational training centers to ensure that the people who were only temporarily accommodated at these welfare villages, were able to lead normal lives until their resettlement. At this juncture, I wish to recall Mr. T. R. Baalu, the leader of the delegation of Members of the Indian Parliament from the constituencies in the State of Tamil Nadu last month, when he said that the Government of Sri Lanka was doing an 'admirable job' despite some shortcomings, which he conceded, were common in such situations. Many other visitors to our country and those who visited the welfare villages have also conveyed similar sentiments. I'm also glad to inform you that the Government has put in place contingency plans and flood preparedness to meet the onset of the monsoons, storm water drainage systems have been constructed by the RDA and District Road Development Authority and Sri Lanka Army with the partnership of international organizations. Much of this work has already been completed and work in Zone 7 will begin very soon. While our concern was to ensure the speedy resettlement the IDPs, their safety was also of paramount importance to the Government of Sri Lanka in view of the fact that there are an estimated number of 1.5 million landmines and unexploded ordnance which contaminate an area of 402 square kilometers in Northern Sri Lanka. While the Sri Lanka Army was responsible for 70% of the total area cleared so far, 7 INGOs and several NGOs are assisting in this process. The demining is carried out under strict conditions to ensure that these areas will be completely out of danger for civilians after resettlement. In this context, between January - August 2009, a total area of 82.08 square kilometers in Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mannar, Trincomalee and Vavuniya districts was surveyed and cleared by the Sri Lanka Army and de-mining agencies, and handed over to the Government of Sri Lanka. The de-mining of 09 Grama Niladhari Divisions in Kilinochchi is expected to be completed soon for resettlement. Demining of areas in the Mullaitivu district has also commenced. For this purpose, the Government recently imported the latest de-mining machinery - five Docking and five MV 4 - to the value of Rs. 520 million from Slovakia and Croatia respectively and five more machines have also arrived to speed up the process. The new machines are expected to clear 5000 square metres of land per day, and it is faster than the manual system used by the INGOs/NGOs, where only 50 square metres can be cleared. A more detailed account on the demining process by the Sri Lanka Army will follow. Excellencies, the Government of Sri Lanka has always been consistent in its assurance that the people accommodated at the welfare villages would be resettled at the earliest possible opportunity and this was reiterated by His Excellency the President Mahinda Rajapaksa and myself on a number of occasions and during our interactions with our colleagues from the international community. The same assurance was reiterated to the delegation from Tamil Nadu by the Government of Sri Lanka. As you are aware His Excellency the President yesterday visited the most recently resettled IDPs at Thunukkai in the Mullaitivu district who have been resettled earlier this week. His Excellency the President emphasized to these returnees that the Government was committed to look after these people who had for many years been moved from place to place by the LTTE as human shields. His Excellency the President has also impressed in Thunukkai that he would not allow the gun culture to raise its head again in this country and that we should make this a place where all could live without fear. His Excellency the President stressed that the 'Northern Spring' development programme was ushering unprecedented development hitherto not seen in the North and that the people were assured of a bright future. He also urged the elders to lead their children on the correct path, identifying them as the flag bearers of future Sri Lanka. While the Government of Sri Lanka was always conscious of and committed to the expeditious resettlement of the IDPs, it was also necessary to ensure that demining was completed in the areas where the people would return. It was also essential to ensure that there were facilities to meet immediate food requirements and basic infrastructure such as water, sanitation and healthcare, to enable the resettled civilians to return to a normal life. Once these requirements were met, the latest phase of resettlement commenced on 15th October, under the supervision of Hon. Basil Rajapaksa. Since then, 108,757 have been resettled as of 3rd November 2009, and those remaining, numbering to about 158,990 are awaiting resettlement in the coming weeks. You would agree that this became possible only after the demining process was completed in these areas where the people were resettled. All measures have been taken to ensure that those remaining within the Camps are provided

with all essential requirements. Special emphasis is being placed on the provision of medical, food and educational needs so as to ensure that remainder of their stay is comfortable. These developments have been clearly in evidence to the 52 agencies including the UN, International and National Non Governmental Organizations working with the government for the welfare of the IDPs. I also wish to remind that over 173 foreign media personnel have visited the affected areas since January 2009. I am also confident that as the demining process progresses, we would be able to resettle the bulk of the people who remain at the welfare villages before the end of January 2010, the target set by the Government of Sri Lanka to complete this challenging task. I wish to also point out, Excellencies, that those being resettled are not merely being sent to their homes, but they have also been provided with dry rations, essential items and funds to ease this process and give them a head start. The Government will provide 02 acres of land for ploughing, free seed paddy, fertilizer subsidies and equipment for farming to the returnees as well. Now that a significant number of the IDPs have been resettled, we have to focus on their livelihood development, provide them with employment opportunities or help return to their previous occupations and trade. The Government, for its part, is doing its utmost, in order to address this issue. The Government has also taken measures to generate employment, create job opportunities and assist in self employment projects. However, more needs to be done. The Government has also taken action to improve infrastructure developments such as building roads, enhance the existing transport network, providing electricity, water supply and telecommunications facilities, among others. I would like to take this opportunity to call on the international community to extend their support for further infrastructure development and shelter, and explore the possibilities for investments in this part of our country which would certainly go a long way in making the lives of those resettled more comfortable. I would now like to invite Brigadier Udayantha Wijeratne, Commander, Engineer Brigade to detail the demining activities which are currently underway. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Colombo 05 November 2009