

Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and Their Vulnerability: A Case Study of Muslim IDPs in Sri Lanka

Mohamed Shareef Asees
Nagoya University—Graduate School of International Development

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine how a minority group has been impacted by an open-conflict and assess the vulnerability of such group by taking a case study of internally displaced Muslims in Sri Lanka's conflict from 1983 to 2009. The prolonged armed conflict, which started in 1983 between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has claimed 90,000 lives and left 950,000 IDPs from three ethnic groups namely the Tamils (82%), Muslims (14%) and Sinhalese (4%). Most (65%) of these IDPs are poor and live in IDP camps within the country. According to the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Service, about 560,000 IDPs live in 540 IDP camps in 14 administrative districts in Sri Lanka. In 1990, when the armed conflict escalated severally between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, the later used a strategy which became known as ethnic-cleansing and forcibly expelled about 75,000 Muslims from the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The displaced Muslims moved to the North-western Province (Puttalam district) and have been living there in 145 IDP camps in four administrative divisions: Kalpitiya, Puttalam, Mundal, and Vannathavillu. The life in IDP camps has affected men and women of all ages and children physically, psychologically, socially, economically and educationally. This was the first time that a certain ethnic group (Muslims) was expelled by the LTTE and forced to live in IDP camps in the past 19 years in the Puttalam district of Sri Lanka.

Keywords

Internally Displaced People (IDPs), Ethnic-cleansing, Vulnerability, and Muslim IDPs

1. INTRODUCTION

Internally Displaced People (IDPs) is a post Cold War concept, and refers to the people who flee from their home due to armed conflicts, ethnic strife and human rights violations, and who remain within their own country (Mooney. 2005: 2). Today around 26 million IDPs live in 54 countries including Sri Lanka (IDMC report, 2009: 8). Most of these IDPs are poor and live in vulnerable conditions in many parts of the world. IDPs are in a particularly tragic situation compared to refugees¹; IDPs do not cross a state border, but rather seek refuge within their own country, which renders their situation intrinsically complicated and creates dependence on the domestic jurisdiction (Geissler. 1999: 451-453). Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that IDPs face more risks than refugees, because they receive little legal protection from either domestic governments or international organizations. Consequently, IDPs usually suffer from lack of food, medicine, shelter, and welfare services while they are subjected to armed attacks, arbitrary detentions, forced conscriptions and sexual violence in open and post conflict situations (Ibid: 463-465).

The lives of IDPs are generally vulnerable (Chambers. 1989:1). “Vulnerability refers to exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty in securing livelihood. Vulnerability has thus two sides: an external side of risks, shock, and stress to which an individual or household is subject; and an internal side which is defenselessness, that is a lack of means to compensate for the loss and the damage caused by internal displacement” (Ibid. 1-2).

According to the IDMC report, IDPs are often said to be more vulnerable than locally settled people. First, IDPs face various threats during their process of internal displacement from one place to another. Second, the social structure of displaced communities may have been destroyed or damaged by an act of physical displacements. Third, IDPs often suffer from loss of assets and limitations on their capacity or ability to work. Fourth, IDPs do not enjoy civil and political rights, including the right to participate fully and equally in public life. Fifth, IDPs may lack administrative documents such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, and death certificates which are essential to continue their normal lives in IDP camps and receive protection from domestic governments (IDMC Report. 2009: 8).

Sri Lanka is composed of three main ethnic groups: Sinhalese 74%, Tamils 17%, and Muslims 7.5% (CPA report. 2006). Sinhalese are demographically considered as an ethnic majority while the Tamils and Muslims are demographically considered as first and second ethnic minorities. The principal religions of the country are Buddhism,

Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. There are three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English. Both Sinhala and Tamil languages are recognized as official languages while English is used as a link language among the three ethnic groups (Ibid. 2006). The complex ethnic, religions and linguistic mix is one factor that has contributed to the conflict between the Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups in Sri Lanka (Ponnambalam. 1983: 4).

Although the conflict in Sri Lanka started in 1948, it only developed into a severe armed conflict from 1983, which claimed 90,000 lives and left 950,000 IDPs in Sri Lanka. The armed conflict ceased in 2009, but the question of how to protect the IDPs has not disappeared. The IDPs are composed of three ethnic groups: the Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim. The degree to which the conflict affected the conditions of the lives of the IDPs may depend on the background of each ethnic IDP. It should be noted that how the Muslim IDPs have been affected by the armed conflict and how vulnerable they have become as a minority ethnic group in Sri Lanka have not been covered in the media nor discussed much by scholars.

One of the main reasons for the disregard of the conditions of Muslim IDPs is that the prolonged armed conflict which started in 1983 was mainly fought between the Sri Lankan majority-led (Sinhalese) government and the LTTE (Tamils). Thus, it is generally conceived that most scholars and researchers pay much attention to the Sinhala and Tamil IDPs while they shed less light on the Muslim IDPs. Muslim IDPs, are subject to vulnerable conditions, and have been living in IDP camps in the Puttalam district of Sri Lanka (Hasbullah. 2004).

The current study examines how ethnic-cleansing² happened to Muslims during the armed conflict, and how it has impacted on the lives of Muslim IDPs in particular. It also discusses how the Sri Lankan government responded to the protection of IDPs. Finally, this article indicates what durable solution³ for IDPs should be realistically considered by policy-makers.

This research particularly relies on the fieldwork conducted by the author from February 20 to March 23, 2008, both in Colombo and in the Puttalam districts of Sri Lanka. Interviews were held with a number of stake holders at various levels: Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers, Resettlement Authority Chairman, JICA staff, Project director, Village headmen, IDP Camp officers and Residents in the IDP camps. As for the fieldwork, 9 IDP camps were selected from four administrative divisions Kalpitiya-2, Mundal-2, Vannathaviluwa-2, and Puttalam-3, and interviews were conducted with more than 100 IDPs. The four administrative divisions were chosen because they contain about 97% of Muslim IDPs. The author had face to face interviews with the

above-mentioned stake holders, and visited IDP camps to examine the vulnerability of IDPs and assess the need for protection of these people. The author has collected data on a number of issues such as food supply, housing projects, welfare services, health-care, education, employment, drinking water and sanitation issues. The data gathered were used to examine the vulnerability of Muslim IDPs.

2. IDPs IN SRI LANKA

According to Jayadeva Uyangoda, the conflict in Sri Lanka can be seen as having two characters: violent and non-violent. The period from 1948 to 1983 is regarded as one with relatively little bloodsheds while the period from 1983 to 2009 was once of intense violence. The non-violent character does however include some communal-violence⁴ between the Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups, while the violent character is related to armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The armed conflict in Sri Lanka lasted for 26 years and produced thousands of IDPs within the country (Uyangoda. 2005).

Internal displacement is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. In 1958, following the ethnic riots between the Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups 12,000 Tamils fled their homes from Colombo and took shelter in the North and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka (Ponnambalam. 1983: 19). The Tamil-Sinhala communal violence in 1965, 1967, 1972, 1977, 1979 and 1981 also led to displacements of Tamils living in Sinhalese areas and Sinhalese living in Tamil areas (Ibid: 21). Similar displacements occurred in 1983 when the ethnic violence broke out in the country between the Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups.

The July riot in 1983 was the beginning of large-scale internal displacements in Sri Lanka. During this period about 100,000 Tamils, more than half of the Tamil population in Colombo, were displaced from their homes and took shelter in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka (Shanmugaratnam. 2000: 3). The end of the July riots, marked the change in the conflict from communal violence to armed conflict, in other words from non violent to violent characters (Ibid: 9).

As is mentioned in the introduction, Sri Lanka's conflict developed into an armed conflict between the Sri Lanka's government and the LTTE in 1983, and was continuously fought till the end of the conflict in 2009. Because of the fact that there had been many cease-fire agreements that were eventually violated by the LTTE, the conflict from 1983 to 2009 has been periodized into four stages: Eelam War I, II, III, & IV as is shown in table 1.

As Table 1 indicates, the number of IDPs increased dramatically from Eelam 1 to Eelam War II. Among 840,000 IDPs produced by Eelam War II, 100,000 were Muslims, despite the fact that the Muslim population consists of only 7.5 % of the entire population (Hasbullah SH, 2004: 3). Moreover, during the Eelam War II, the LTTE used ethnic cleansing and forcibly expelled about 75,000 Muslims from the Northern Province of Sri Lanka (Ibid. 5).

In fact, this was the first time since the beginning of the conflict that Muslims began to be internally displaced within their own country. When the armed conflict started in 1983 it was mainly fought between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. However, after 1990 this conflict spread to Muslims and produced thousands of IDPs from the Muslim ethnic group. The main reason for this spread of armed conflict among the Muslims is the ethnicity issue. Although the Tamils and Muslims speak the same language (Tamil) they have differences in their ethnicity. For example, the Tamils mainly Hindu introduces their ethnicity based on their language (Tamil) while the Muslims mostly (Islam) introduces their ethnicity based on their religion. These differences eventually led to an ethnic cleansing against the Muslims in Sri Lanka, as will be explained in detail in section 3.

While during the period of Eelam war III, the LTTE killed many civilians from the Sinhala ethnic group and drove about 5,000 Sinhalese from their homes⁵, Tamils were mainly displaced during Eelam War IV. The above-mentioned characteristics of each War and the way the conflict was fought show that Muslim IDPs have been affected most in proportion to its population.

Table-1: Internal Displacements from 1983 to 2009

Eelam wars	Number of deaths	Number of IDPs
Eelam war -1 1983- 1990	12,000	100,000
Eelam war -2 1990- 1995	40,000	840,000
Eelam war -3 1995- 2002	62,000	525,000
Eelam war -4 2006- 2009	90,000	950, 000

(Source: Author, based on the data from the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Service. 2008)

3. MUSLIM IDPs

The prolonged armed conflict which started in 1983 between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE resulted in approximately 100,000 IDPs from the Muslim

ethnic group. While Muslims are the second largest, ethnic minority group in Sri Lanka representing around 7.5% of the total population, they account for 14% of total IDPs in the country (Hasbulla. 2004: 3). A question here is why Muslims largely have become IDPs, even though they have not been involved in the armed conflict? In fact, the majority of Muslims who lived in the North and East were displaced due to the armed conflict and ethnic cleansing. In 1990 when the Eelam War II started between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, the latter used ethnic cleansing as a strategy and forcibly expelled about 75,000 Muslims from the Northern Province in five districts: Jaffna 15,000, Mannar 40,000, Vavuniya 12,000, Mulaitheevu 5,000, and Kilinochi 3,000 (Haniffa. 2007: 3-4). The purpose of this expulsion was to create an exclusively ethnic Tamil state in the North and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. The following section will elaborate more on what led to this ethnic cleansing of the Muslims.

3.1. ETHNIC CLEANSING OF MUSLIM IDPs

The Muslims of the Northern Province were forced to leave their homes in the third week of October 1990. The LTTE announced over the loudspeaker through the streets of Muslim areas in the Northern Province that the Muslims must leave their homes, their villages and town, leaving behind all their valuables or face death at the hands of LTTE (Hasbulla. 2002: 3).

The ultimatum in many places was that Muslims should leave this region within 48 hours; but 15,000 Muslims of Jaffna town were given only two hours to leave their homes (Ibid: 4). “This unexpected order of expulsion from their own homes was a great shock to all Muslims. There were many people who fainted on hearing it: people wailed at a funeral house clinging to one another” (Interview with a group of Muslim IDPs in Puttalam March 20, 2008). Muslim leaders appealed to the LTTE to change their policy but were rebuffed. They were told that the orders came from the very top of the LTTE and thus were no changeable (Hasbulla. 2002: 3).

The interviewees stated that they were helpless during their process of internal displacement. The Sri Lankan Government forces did nothing to prevent the expulsion. It has been reported that International humanitarian agencies, some of which were working in the Northern Province, made no effort to apply international pressure to prevent the forcible expulsion of the Muslims (ICRC Report. 2008). This indicates that both the Sri Lankan government and international organizations made no effort to prevent the expulsion of Muslims in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. These people lost their homes, possessions, livelihoods, communities, and personal histories in one

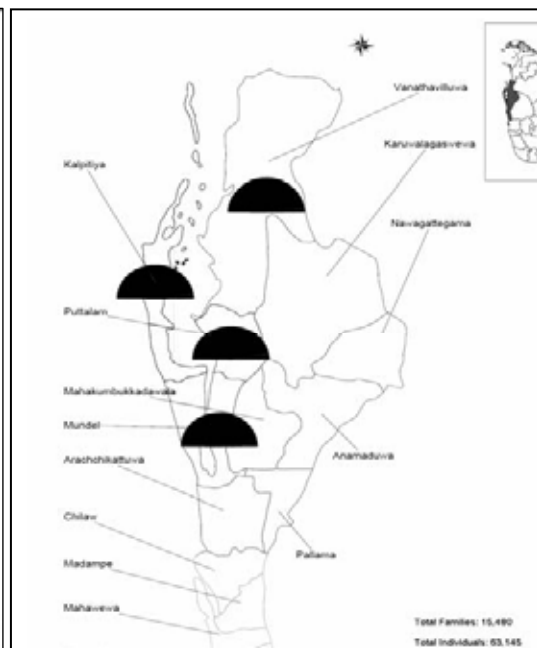
day. They left behind their belongings, their community, and their sense of citizenship in Sri Lanka. Today they live in over-crowded settlements and IDP camps in the impoverished district of Puttalam in Sri Lanka (Haniffa. 2007: 3).

The following maps illustrate the process of internal displacement from the Northern Province to the North-western Province and their present location in four administrative divisions in the Puttalam district of Sri Lanka: Kalpitiya, Vannatavillu, Mundal and Puttalam. According to Map 1, the Muslim IDPs from Jaffna, Kilinichi, Mullaitheevu, and Vavuniya districts mainly used the land route to reach the Puttalam district while the Mannar people took the sea route to reach their destination. Those who came through the sea route settled in Kalpitiya coastal areas while the others who took the land route located in the mainland of Puttalam district (Shanmugaratnam. 2000: 18-23)

Map-1



Map-2



(Source: Prepared by author based on the UNHCR and World Bank report in 2006 & 2007).

3.2. VULNERABILITY OF MUSLIM IDPs

Internal displacement was a horrific event for many Muslim IDPs in Sri Lanka. It has been some 19 years since the Muslims were evacuated from the North and

permanently became IDPs in the North-western Province (Puttalam district) of Sri Lanka. Since their arrival in Puttalam they have lived there as IDPs in many IDP camps. The life in these camps have left the people de-moralized and affected them physically, psychologically, socially, economically and educationally (Haniffa. 2007: 5). As for the present challenges, the Muslim IDPs face many economic difficulties in the Puttalam district and other areas where they live.

In Puttalam there are 60,000 Muslim IDPs living in the North-west coastal region (Hasbulla. 2004: 6). The total population of this region doubled with the arrival of Muslim IDPs. When they first arrived, this region was among the least developed areas in the country and was in no position to offer economic opportunities to the IDPs. More than 90% of IDPs still depends on dry food-rations provided by the Sri Lankan government and the World Food Program. Of these, 75% continued to live in IDP camps (Ibid: 6-8). It is not possible for the IDPs to stand on their own feet in such a resource-poor area. The substandard quality of food items and their improper⁶ distribution has seriously affected the IDPs. Moreover, the arrival of Muslim IDPs has also created conflict and competition between the IDPs and local residents over many issues related to education, natural resources and job opportunities. The author has seen first hand how the lack of drinking water⁷, sanitation, health-care, and waste disposal have become common problems for many IDPs in the Puttalam district of Sri Lanka.

4. THE ROLE OF SRI LANKAN GOVERNMENT TOWARDS IDPs

The Sri Lankan government has passed a number of Parliament Acts and established Cabinet Ministries and Local Authorities to deal with IDPs. There are eight Parliament acts to protect IDPs namely: Rehabilitation of Persons, Properties and Industries Authority Act, No. 29 of 1987, Welfare Benefits Act, No. 24 of 2002, Mediation Act, No. 21 of 2003, The Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act, No. 13 of 2005, The Tsunami Special Provision Act, No. 16 of 2005, Registration of Deaths Temporary Provision Act, No. 17 of 2005, The Geneva Conventions Act, No. 04 of 2006, and the Resettlement Authority Act, No. 09 of 2007 (Parliament of Sri Lanka Act No. 29, 24, 21, 13, 16, 17, 04 & 09).

The Sri Lankan government has established five Cabinet Ministries: the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, Ministry of Social Service and Social Welfare, Ministry of Child Development and Women Empowerment, Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, and Ministry of Nation Building. Each Ministry deals with various issues of IDPs and protects them from vulnerability. Four

Local Authorities have been established for IDPs: Resettlement Authority, Rehabilitation Authority, National Disaster Relief Service Authority, and Northern Displaced Muslims Authority. Each Authority deal with IDPs and protect them in various ways. (Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services Report June 20, 2009).

Moreover, the Sri Lankan government has collaborated with international organizations and some domestic NGOs to provide food, shelter, and resettlement for IDPs in Sri Lanka. For example, in 2007, the Sri Lankan government worked together with the World Bank and committed to provide approximately 7,885 houses for both the Northern Muslim IDPs and some selected local residents in the Puttalam district. The main purpose of this housing project is to relocate about 50% of Muslim IDPs and improve their livelihood over four years in the Puttalam district of Sri Lanka (World Bank Housing Report October 10, 2007).

Although the Sri Lankan government has established a numbers of Parliament Acts, Cabinet Ministries and Local Authorities to deal with IDPs, there are problems implementing them for IDPs. For example, the lack of power among Local Authorities remains as an obstacle to development projects for IDPs. It is reported that the Northern Displaced Muslims Authority located in the Puttalam district of Sri Lanka, do not have enough power to commence development projects for Muslim IDPs. All development projects were implemented by Cabinet Ministries. In order to reach IDPs effectively the actual projects should be done by local authorities to strengthening the power of local authorities is necessary.

4.1. DURABLE SOLUTIONS

According to UNHCR, there are three durable solutions to end the process of internal displacements: Repatriation, Local-integration and Relocation. Repatriation aims to send the IDPs back to their hometown and provides both housing and infrastructure for IDPs. Local-integration means to settle the IDPs with the host community. Relocation seeks to settle the IDPs in a different area where the domestic government and international organizations can provide housings and other infrastructure (UNHCR Revalidation Report 2004: 14).

The Sri Lankan government applied the above three durable solutions to end the process of internal displacements among the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnic groups. As for the Tamils, the Sri Lankan government mainly used repatriation as a durable solution and repatriated about 80% of Tamil IDPs in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka.

For the Sinhalese, the Sri Lankan government used the Local-integration as a durable solution and locally integrated about 90% of Sinhalese IDPs in the North-central Province of Sri Lanka. For the Muslim IDPs, the Sri Lankan government introduced relocation as a durable solution and committed to relocate about 50% of Muslim IDPs in the North-western Province (Puttalam district) of Sri Lanka (Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Service Report March 20, 2008).

Although the UNHCR introduced these durable there are certain limitations to using these solutions for some IDPs in Sri Lanka. For example, there are 250,000 Tamil IDPs living in IDP camps in Vavuniya district, most of whom from the Northern Province. Due to the security issues and the problems of land mines the Sri Lankan government restricted their freedom of movement. As a result, these IDPs continue to stay in IDP camps without any durable solutions. It clears that the UNHCR needs to find some alternative solutions for these IDPs in the future.

4.2. RELOCATION OF MUSLIM IDPs

Relocation has been taking place since 2000, especially for the IDPs that were resulted from the conflict in many areas such as Vavuniya, Anuradapura, Trincomale and Batticola. In these areas a number of Tamils and Sinhala conflict-induced IDPs were, relocated with the assistance from the Sri Lankan government and International organizations (Interview with project director in Vavuniya February 20, 2008). Regarding the Muslim IDPs, relocation started in 2007 with the financial assistance from the World Bank. A number of issues are connected with the relocation of Muslim IDPs in Sri Lanka. Firstly, the long-term stay in IDP camps in the Puttalam district: According to UNHCR, about 75% of IDPs have continued to live in IDP camps in the past 19 years (UNHCR report. 2006: 17). Secondly, the desire for relocation in the Puttalam district: it is reported that around 90% of Muslim IDPs expressed their desire to relocate in the Puttalam district (Ibid. 18). Thirdly, the nature and presence of Muslim IDPs in the Puttalam district: there are 17 administrative divisions in the Puttalam district, with 97% of Muslim IDPs living in four administrative divisions, namely Kalpitiya 55%, Puttalam 33%, Mundal 8% and Vannathavillu 3% (World Bank Report. 2007: 6). This figure suggests that it is easy to mobilize the Muslim IDPs and relocate them in the Puttalam district. Moreover, the Muslim IDPs who live in the above four administrative divisions also have some similarities in terms of their internal displacement and their previous lives in their hometowns. For example, when IDPs came to Puttalam in 1990, they managed to find places to live with their friends and relatives (Interview with an IDP

camp officer in Kalpitiya Division March 18, 2008).

During the fieldwork survey in Sri Lanka, it was observed that many IDPs in the Kalpitiya division live with their friends and relatives as they did when they lived back in their home towns. Even though some of them were scattered during their process of internal displacement they eventually managed to join their kith and kin. According to a camp officer⁸ at the Al-Manar camp in kalpitiya division, there is a youth service organization which is active in mobilizing the displaced people from different areas and bringing them to a certain IDP camp to make if possible for them to live with their friends and relatives (interview with IDP camp officer March 20, 2008).

5. CONCLUSION

Internal displacement is a common phenomenon among the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Each ethnic group experienced different types of internal displacement and remain within the country in a vulnerable condition. The degree of vulnerability varies among ethnic groups. Muslim IDPs are particularly vulnerable in terms of ethnic cleansing when compared to Tamil and Sinhala IDPs (Hasbulla. 2002).

The Muslim IDPs were subject to a forcible expulsion from the Northern Province to North-western Province. They were not allowed to bring any of their valuables with them⁹. It was the first time that the Muslims went through such forcible expulsion in their long-term history in Sri Lanka. The other two ethnic groups Sinhalese and Tamils were not forcibly evacuated either by LTTE or by the Sri Lankan forces (Haniffa. 2007: 13). Most of them were voluntarily displaced from their hometowns and managed to take their valuables with them. In this sense Muslim IDPs suffered much during their process of internal displacement when compared to Tamil and Sinhala IDPs.

Muslim IDPs are vulnerable in terms of their long-term stay in IDP camps when compared to Tamil and Sinhala IDPs; they have been living in Puttalam IDP camps for the past 19 years enduring a lack of basic necessities (Ibid. 14). "They never had a chance either to visit or return to their hometowns. But in the case of Sinhala and Tamil IDPs, some of them managed to return to their home town while some others moved to relocation villages" (Hasbullah. 2002: 4). According to UNHCR report in 2006, about 70% of Tamil IDPs were repatriated to their home during the peace talks in Sri Lanka (from 2002 to 2005) while another 90% of Sinhala IDPs relocated in the North-central province of Sri Lanka.

The above-mentioned situation that Muslim IDPs experienced indicate that the

government policy of protecting Muslim IDPs was limited when compared to Tamil and Sinhala IDPs. Thus, much more external intervention may be needed to protect Muslim IDPs who have been marginalized as a minority group in society. The true meaning of “durable solutions” needs to be reconsidered not only by policy-makers of the Sri Lankan government but also by international aid practitioners.

Although, the UNHCR introduced three durable solutions for IDPs, still it requires some additional approaches for remaining IDPs who stay in IDP camps. Moreover, the Sri Lankan government should reconsider its present policy among IDPs and ensure the coordination between cabinet ministries and local authorities to implement development projects for IDPs in Sri Lanka.

NOTES

- ¹ IDPs often receive less legal protection from domestic governments when compared to Refugees.
- ² Ethnic cleansing is a term that has come to be used broadly to describe all forms of ethnically motivated violence, ranging from murder, rape, and torture to the forcible removal of populations.
- ³ Durable solution explains some alternative approaches to end the process of internal displacements.
- ⁴ Communal violence refers to a situation where violence is perpetrated across ethnic lines, and victims are chosen based upon ethnic group membership.
- ⁵ Regarding the Sinhala IDPs they were mainly displaced from their homes due to the fear of LTTE.
- ⁶ Some IDPs pointed out that the dry-food ration provide by the Sri Lankan government and the WFP always get late and not reach all the people (Interview with IDPs March 21, 2008).
- ⁷ It is observed that many IDPs bring drinking water from neighboring villages.
- ⁸ Each IDP camp has its own camp officer who supposed to take care of IDPs and report their problems to the administrative office.
- ⁹ Some Northern Muslims say that the LTTE sold the abandoned goods at auctions while others say that they were given away to the LTTE cadres and their families (Interview with a group of IDPs in Kalpitiya March 19, 2008).

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