

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka

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UNHCR support Government with first IDP returns to Ampara in seven years

Some one thousand persons are going back to their homes in Ampara today, marking the first Government-organized return movement in the district in seven years.

Originally hailing from two areas of the Thirukkivil division in Ampara, these internally displaced persons (IDPs) were on the move since 1990 due to the conflict, until they returned to their villages following the 2002 ceasefire. However they were once again displaced by the escalation in violence in the east in 2006 and have since been staying with friends and relatives in areas nearby.

Prior to return, demining/ clearance of unexploded ordnance was completed and the IDPs were provided an opportunity to engage in a 'go&see' visit to ensure that they were able to make an independent and well-informed decision.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and partners are supporting the Government of Sri Lanka with the return process. In addition to accompanying today's process, the agency is distributing emergency shelter kits that can be used as a temporary measure. Shelter agencies will carry out shelter assistance for the returnees whose homes have been completely destroyed. UNHCR will also provide the families in the return areas with return packages which include kitchen sets, mosquito nets and hygiene kits among other items.

Moreover, UNHCR will coordinate closely with local government and other agencies in the district to help carry out infrastructure development, livelihood support and improve services such as education in the return areas. UNHCR staff will also make regular visits to the return villages to address and resolve outstanding concerns.

Staff on the ground say in general, the IDPs are keen to go back to their villages of origin. They are among some 3,600 IDPs living with host families in Ampara and are awaiting return.

So far UNHCR has assisted the Government with facilitating the return of more than 220,000 IDPs in the east during the last two years while only a handful remain in displacement. As conditions stabilize in the emergency shelter sites in Sri Lanka's north and the Government prepares for mass returns, good practices such as demining and 'go&see' visits that have been adopted in the east and parts of the north should serve as an example to ensure that these returns take place in safety and dignity.

PRESS RELEASE

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UNHCR remains committed to providing support to the Government with future IDP returns in Sri Lanka's North and East.
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For further information on these topics, please contact:

Sulakshani Perera

External Relations Assistant

UNHCR Colombo

Mobile: 0777 272494

pereras@unhcr.org

www.unhcr.lk