

Update on United Nations Humanitarian Support to Sri Lanka 9 July 2009

Introduction

Six weeks after the conclusion of the war in Sri Lanka, the UN continues its support to Government of Sri Lanka's operations in the camps in Vavuniya, Jaffna and Trincomalee. These camps currently hold approximately 280,000 people, and although conditions have improved as the weeks have passed, much remains to be done. Presented below are snapshots of some of the achievements in UN support by emergency sector and some of the gaps that remain. UN support supplements that provided by the Government and by Sri Lankans from all parts of the country as well as the significant contributions made by dozens of NGO partners. The management of camps with such a large population brings with it a vast array of challenges, some of which can be relatively easily resolved, and some of which are far more complex. The lasting solution for camp residents is ultimately a return to their home areas; the government has committed to return the majority of the population within six months. The UN intends to regularly update this snapshot report while we – with our NGO partners and working closely with Government authorities - continue to serve the needs of people in the camps.

Shelter

UNHCR leads the Shelter Coordination Cell (SCC) to support coordination between the UN, NGO partners and local authorities responsible for emergency shelter assistance. Since the major influx of IDPs in April and May, the SCC, working closely with the Government, has mounted a massive operation. SCC partners have constructed some 22,000 emergency shelters and erected another 21,000 tents.

Timely decongestion of overcrowded sites is now a priority in Vavuniya. During transfers of IDPs by the authorities, UNHCR is present to advocate for family unity and for the needs of Persons with Special Needs (PWSN), including proximity to medical, water and sanitation facilities for the extremely vulnerable. As the decongestion progresses and new sites are created, the Government and the SCC will continue to provide emergency shelter support. In close cooperation between Shelter, Camp Management and Water and Sanitation partners, support is being provided to the Government to improve drainage of sites.

In addition, the SCC is supporting the government to decommission those transit sites where IDPs were temporarily accommodated during the first stages of the influx, including schools and other public buildings.

Water and Sanitation

Ensuring the 280,000 IDPs in displacement camps have access to sufficient water and adequate sanitation facilities, is a priority. While keeping pace with the needs has presented significant challenges, particularly during the rapid influxes from the Vanni into Vavuniya in April and May, much progress has been made. The Government, together with UNICEF, UN and NGO partners, has built 8,761 latrines in camps and transit centres in Vavuniya, Jaffna and Trincomalee districts. In collaboration with the National Water Board and the Ministry of Resettlement and Relief Services, UNICEF supported the construction of a water system from the Malwathu Oya River. The pipeline is now operational and provides 4,000 cubic meters of water (4 million litres) per day to Menik Farm through a 5.5 km long pipeline. Water treatment units have also been put in place in IDP camps and in hospitals to produce drinking water. The balance of the 6,000 cubic metre daily water requirement in Menik Farm is provided through trucking of water and from deep wells. Priority focus is now on construction of additional latrines and wells and improving waste disposal to mitigate health risks.

Non-food items

Regular distribution of non-food items has been taking place in the emergency shelter sites. Since the beginning of this year, UN and NGO partners have provided plastic mats, bed sheets, mosquito nets, kitchen sets, hygiene packs and other items, including clothing for men and women, slippers and jerry cans.

Nearly every IDP family in Vavuniya (88,000) has now received non-food packages through UNHCR and its partners. Distribution of consumable items, such as hygiene packages, continues on a regular basis. The agency, together with partners, is also carrying out assessments to identify gaps in non-food items, to ensure adequate coverage for the affected population.

Food

WFP continues to provide dry rations including wheat flour, rice, dhal, vegetable oil and sugar to meet the food needs of the over 280,000 newly displaced IDPs in camps. In line with the wishes of most IDP families a move toward individual cooking is replacing the communal cooking that was prominent during the first phase after the major influx. With a view to expedite food distributions, WFP has also begun large scale direct distributions to some 90,000 beneficiaries in zones 1 and 3 at Menik Farm, and is planning to step up these distributions on a weekly basis. To expedite delivery, WFP has begun transporting food to Vavuniya by rail.

Despite much progress, challenges of safety, water availability, sanitation and waste disposal related to cooking remain. WFP works closely with 22 NGO partners which are providing complementary and supplementary food support in IDP camps. Dwindling NGO funding for complementary food is a growing concern. In partnership with UNICEF and NGO partners, WFP is also working to support the Government in providing Corn Soya Blend (CSB) to approximately 35,000 children under 5 years as well as pregnant and lactating mothers.

Health and Nutrition

WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and NGO partners are working closely with the Ministry of Health and Nutrition (MoHN) to support the health and nutritional needs of the newly displaced populations. Four hospitals in Vavuniya, Mannar, Cheddikulam and Poovarasankulam provide the majority of inpatient care for IDPs. Fourteen Primary Health Care Centres and the four referral hospitals in the IDP sites provide health care services to the displaced population. Mobile health teams are also providing basic and emergency health care services inside the IDP camps and additional doctors and nurses have been appointed to health facilities in the area. Emergency reproductive, maternity and hygiene kits are provided to promote safe deliveries and hygiene of mother and the new-born. Sarvodaya community health volunteers have been mobilized to assist health staff and address human resource gaps in obstetric and ambulance services. Six health centres in IDP camps in Mannar were provided equipment and supplies to improve the quality of reproductive health services rendered. Disease surveillance indicates that the number of new cases of Chickenpox and infective hepatitis are decreasing.

To respond to the nutritional needs of malnourished children, UNICEF is supporting the establishment of 21 Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres (NRC), of which 12 are operational. Since the beginning of the IDP influx, more than 5,600 children have been treated with High Energy Biscuits and Unimix for moderate malnutrition and more than 3,200 children with BP100 and Plumpy Nut for Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM). Micronutrient and de-worming tablets have also been provided. At the Vavuniya General Hospital, the pediatric ward (50 beds) and the therapeutic nutrition centre are now operational, and a maternity ward (72 beds) is under construction. Another pediatric ward (50 beds) is under construction at Cheddikulam Hospital.

Education

Working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, UNICEF and Save the Children in Sri Lanka together with other NGO partners have built 132 Temporary Learning Spaces, equivalent to 660 classrooms, with another 50 temporary learning spaces (250 classrooms) under construction. More than 50,000 displaced children, including host communities, have access to education and to school materials including blackboards and teacher, student and individual learning kits as well as recreational materials. More than 15,000 children have benefited from recreational activities, toys and games, sport, and youth drama through 90 Child Friendly Spaces (CFS).

Protection

Although improvements have been made on protection concerns over the past month, more progress is needed. Most sites accommodating Vanni IDPs now have visitor centres allowing IDPs to meet friends and relatives although under certain conditions. Public phones and postal systems are also available in some of the sites. At the initiative of IDPs themselves, particularly teachers and Government officers, camp committees have been formed and IDP teachers are conducting informal classes for students of all ages in Jaffna and also in Vavuniya. UNHCR, the government and partners undertook 39 participatory assessments in the camps with women, men, boys and girls of different ages to gain a better understanding of the protection problems they face and to explore possible solutions with relevant government partners.

A marked reduction in the role of the military inside the camps is also a welcome development. UNHCR continues to monitor potential protection risks associated with large, overcrowded camps and is in close liaison with authorities at all levels. Issues of potential concern include social disruption and maintaining law and order, as well as reducing risks associated with Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV).

Freedom of movement remains the overriding issue with nearly 280,000 IDPs confined within the camps, restricting their ability to access employment, attend regular schools, visit family and friends, and ultimately choose their place of residence. To date, some 4,300 IDPs, mostly elderly, have been released and the Government has announced that another 9,000 have been cleared for release. While these developments are welcome, the UN continues to advocate for the timely release of other persons with specific needs as well as the broadening of categories of people for release.

Family reunification also remains a priority. As of the end of June, the Government reported that over 5,000 family members have been brought together. Self-identification / reunification has occurred between the different zones in Menik Farm and following IDP protests at the end of June, the authorities have agreed to officially allow movement between zones. Although inter-district family reunification has proved to be more problematic due to administrative difficulties; the first reunifications of 54 families took place from Vavuniya to Mannar. UNICEF has identified 1,400 separated children, 49 unaccompanied minors, 366 orphans (children who moved from the Vanni as part of the orphanage in which they lived prior to the conflict) and 350 children in hospitals.

Approximately 9,400 individuals with links to the LTTE have been separated from the civilian population and accommodated in 'rehabilitation' facilities. Transfer of these "surrendered" to the authority of the Commissioner General for Rehabilitation is an initial step in the Government's rehabilitation process. At the same time, the application of Constitutional rights and the process for persons taken into custody must be ensured. Notification to families and the role of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka to track those arrested is particularly important to avoid stress and anxiety among the displaced. UNICEF continues to work closely with the Office of the Rehabilitation Commissioner and other Government partners with regard to children leaving armed groups. These children fall under the care of the Government Emergency Regulation for Child Soldiers, adopted in December 2008. Since the beginning of the year, 343 former child soldiers have been identified, and have been, or are in the process of being, transferred to child rehabilitation centres.

Conclusion

Although this snapshot focuses on the conditions faced by the inhabitants of the camps, the UN continues to support the Government's commitment to rapidly return people to their homes. As the Government of Sri Lanka finalizes its 180-day plan, the displaced are waiting to receive information on their future, on return plans and on conditions and services in their areas of origin. Major challenges to this remain, such as the surveying and clearance of large areas suspected of mine contamination and the re-establishment of Government services. These challenges must be met through Government leadership, with the support of the United Nations and the many other partners of Sri Lanka.