



UN humanitarian chief welcomes progress on Sri Lankan displaced, but returnees need continued support

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(Colombo/New York, 19 November 2009): United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes concluded the final day of his three-day mission to Sri Lanka. He met Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe, Secretary of Defense Gotabaya Rajapaksa, head of Uthuru Wasanthaya -- the 180-day resettlement and reconstruction program in the North -- Basil Rajapaksa, and President Mahinda Rajapaksa. In addition Mr. Holmes met with a delegation of members of parliament of the Tamil National Alliance to hear their views on the situation of internally displaced people (IDPs) and the political process.

In his joint press conference with Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, also organized today, Mr. Holmes welcomed the recent releases and returns of IDPs from camps and in particular the halved number of people in the main camp in Menik Farm. He underscored the fundamental need for full freedom of movement for IDPs who remain in camps, an issue that he hoped could be rapidly resolved. He hoped to see continued progress in allowing people to leave the camps and restore their normal life and dignity. He noted that the returnees he met on his field visits were pleased that they could return home. However, he also said the returns process could be improved, in particular through better consultations with IDPs and more timely information sharing with humanitarian partners on return plans.

Mr. Holmes made clear that the United Nations remains committed to working with the Government to improve the returns process as well as to assure satisfactory conditions in areas of return, especially in the fields of shelter, basic services and livelihoods. He noted that demining and mine risk education were meanwhile of critical importance in ensuring the safety of returnees.

"Both UN organisations and NGOs are ready to continue to help support IDPs in camps and assist returnees with their humanitarian needs, especially in terms of food, shelter, basic services, and livelihoods. The UN is also keen to support longer-term recovery and reconstruction," Mr. Holmes said.

Mr. Holmes also emphasized the need to build confidence between communities with a view to ensuring a just and sustainable peace and long-term political reconciliation. In this regard, he welcomed not only the recent progress in facilitating returns but also increased government flexibility in terms of postconflict normalization, for example the recent opening of the A9 road which links northern and southern Sri Lanka. Part of this confidence building and reconciliation needs to be a genuine accountability process dealing with the consequences of the conflict and possible violations of international humanitarian law by both sides.

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