

Displaced increasingly returning home from camps – UN



About 90,000 Sri Lankans displaced by the conflict in Sri Lanka have returned to their homes in the past three months, and the pace of returns has begun to accelerate, the United Nations refugee agency reported.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesperson Andrej Mahecic told journalists that in the past two weeks alone, an estimated 39,000 people have returned to their former villages – mostly in the north and east of Sri Lanka – as part of the Government’s return plan.

Another 16,500 people have been released from the camps where they have been sheltering since the conflict ended in May and are being accommodated with host families, Mr. Mahecic said. This group includes many pregnant women and elderly persons. A number of persons with disabilities have also been released to specialized care institutions.

More than 270,000 Sri Lankans were staying in closed camps after hostilities between the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended, and in recent months senior UN humanitarian and human rights officials have voiced concern over their safety.

About 163,000 people now remain, and Mr. Mahecic said conditions inside those camps are deteriorating.

“UNHCR and other UN agencies continue to advocate strongly with the Government of Sri Lanka to expedite the return of all remaining IDPs [internally displaced persons] to their areas of origin in safety and dignity and in line with international standards,” he told a press briefing in Geneva, where the agency is headquartered.

“We also continue to advocate for the full freedom of movement for those who are not able to immediately return to their homes or stay with friends and relatives once the ongoing phase of the return is complete.”

UNHCR, with the assistance of other UN aid agencies, has been distributing relief items such as sleeping mats, bed sheets and hurricane lamps to people returning to their former communities.

Returning families also receive a shelter grant equivalent to about \$250 so they can start rebuilding their homes.

In Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, the agency has held talks with Government officials to ensure that minimum standards for safe returns, such as the completion of mine clearance activities and access to services, are met.

UNHCR has provided five demining flail machines to speed up mine-clearing operations in former conflict areas, and those machines are expected to arrive tomorrow.

The mine clearance operations will be carried out by the Sri Lankan Government with the help of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and other organizations. (UN)