



# UNHCR

## The UN Refugee Agency

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### UNHCR helps first Sri Lankan refugees return by ferry from India

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka – UNHCR is today opening the return of Sri Lankan refugees from India to Colombo by ferry as part of its facilitated voluntary repatriation programme.

The first group of 37 refugees (15 families) arrived by commercial ferry in the Port of Colombo this morning after an overnight voyage from Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu, southern India. They were accompanied by three UNHCR staff from India.

The return by sea will add a fresh dimension to UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programme as until now, all returns have been by air.

"The start of returns by sea is significant as refugees in camps in India have been telling us they want to return by ferry so they can bring more of their household possessions home with them," said UNHCR's Representative in Sri Lanka Michael Zwack.

As of end-September 2011, UNHCR has helped 1,493 Sri Lankan refugees (466 families) return home to the north and east this year. The returns are mainly from India (1,448) while small numbers have also come back from Malaysia, Georgia and the Caribbean Island of St. Lucia. In 2010, a total of 2054 Sri Lankan refugees returned home an increase over some 800 the previous year.

"Refugees have been returning steadily in small and increasing numbers to Sri Lanka. It's difficult to predict how many more will opt to return with the ferry route now open. But, what is important is that if they do want to return home and bring many of their possessions they now have that opportunity," Zwack said.

All the refugees returning today have been living in some of the 112 refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, India. Among the first arrivals by ferry were some refugees returning after more than two decades in India.

The UNHCR Representative was present at the Colombo port to welcome the returnees, along with the Minister of Economic Development and Chairman of the Presidential Taskforce for Resettlement, Development and Security in the Northern

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Province Basil Rajapaksa. They were also joined by the Deputy Minister of Resettlement Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan and government officials.

Most refugees have been returning to the eastern district of Trincomalee, followed by Mannar, Vavuniya and Jaffna in Sri Lanka's north. Some people are also returning to the Kilinochchi, Colombo, Batticaloa, Kandy, Ampara, Matale and Puttalam areas.

"The refugees, like the tens of thousands of internally displaced people who have returned home recently, face challenges in re-establishing themselves. Earning a living and getting decent shelter are two of the things returned refugees tell us are their greatest concerns," Zwack said.

Sri Lankan refugees returning under UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programme receive a standard reintegration grant as a first step towards helping them restart their lives. Once at their destination in Sri Lanka, these returnees can approach one of UNHCR's five offices in the north and east to obtain a kit of basic household supplies.

UNHCR carries out regular monitoring and seeks to ensure that returnees receive mine risk education and are included in the food ration lists and become considered as beneficiaries to the many government, UN and other projects taking place to re-establish the lives of Sri Lankans in the North and East of the country. In addition, UNHCR refers persons with special needs (persons with disabilities, elderly persons etc) to specialized institutions and those in need of legal counselling to the relevant government authority or other organizations that can provide targeted assistance.

Sri Lankan refugees abroad who wish to return home can approach the closest UNHCR office for assistance in their country of asylum.

UNHCR's most recent statistics, gathered from governments, show that as of end-2010 there are some 141,063 Sri Lankan refugees in 65 countries, with a majority – some 69,000 in 112 refugee camps and another 32,000 living outside camps in Tamil Nadu, India. The other main countries with Sri Lankan refugees are France, Canada, Germany, UK, Switzerland, Australia, Malaysia, the United States and Italy.

ENDS

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