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Sri Lankan refugee return figures fall in 2011, amidst suspension of ferry service

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka – The number of Sri Lankan refugees returning home has seen a marked drop in 2011 when compared with the previous year, latest UNHCR statistics show.

A total of 1,728 Sri Lankan refugees returned under UNHCR's facilitated voluntary repatriation programme last year while higher numbers were recorded in 2010 during which the agency helped some 2,054 Sri Lankan refugees come home. In 2009, UNHCR facilitated the voluntary return of some 818 individuals.

“Although we introduced new measures to make the voluntary repatriation process easier, the pace of returns last year was slower than initially expected. This could be due to the delay in the launch, and subsequent suspension of the Colombo-Tuticorin ferry service,” says UNHCR Representative in Sri Lanka Michael Zwack.

In October 2011, UNHCR opened up the return of Sri Lankan refugees from India to Colombo by ferry, adding a new dimension to its voluntary repatriation programme. Until then, all returns took place by air. However the ferry service was suspended one month later.

“Passengers on the ferry can bring up to five times more luggage than those traveling by flight so many refugees were waiting until the ferry service started so that they could bring their belongings. Following the suspension of the service, some refugees are once again opting to return by air but a substantial number say they would rather wait until it resumes,” added Zwack.

Many of the returns so far are from camps in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Small numbers have also returned from Malaysia, Georgia and the Caribbean Island of St. Lucia.

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. Each individual is also provided with a modest transport grant to help them arrange their own transportation back to their villages. 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.

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A majority of the returns are taking place to Sri Lanka's eastern district of Trincomalee. A substantial number of Sri Lankan refugees are also going back to the Mannar and Vavuniya districts in the country's north while small groups are returning to Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Batticaloa, Colombo, Ampara, Puttalam and Kandy.

UNHCR carries out regular monitoring in these areas 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 reestablish 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 counseling 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.

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