

Sri Lanka steps up mine clearance

The Sri Lankan government has stepped up clearing mines in former rebel-controlled areas aimed at resettling 159,000 war refugees before the end of January, Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama said Thursday.

He told Colombo-based diplomats that an estimated 1.5 million unexploded landmines remained in an area of 402 sq km.

Bogollagama said the government has recently imported the latest in de-mining machinery from Slovakia and Croatia and five more machines had also arrived to speed up the mine clearance.

'The new machines are expected to clear 5,000 sq metres of land per day, and it is faster than the manual system used by the non-governmental organisations, where only 50 sq metres can be cleared,' the minister said.

The government claimed it had resettled 108,757 people since October, but local NGOs said some of them have only been moved to temporary camps in other locations.

The final stages of fighting between government troops and Tamil separatist rebels, which ended with the guerillas' defeat in May, left more than 280,000 people displaced. All were transferred to camps in the north and the bulk of the 159,000 remaining in the camps live in the Vavuniya district.

The government has been under local and international pressure to resettle the displaced people before the onset of heavy rains later this month in the north.

Military operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which had been fighting for a separate homeland for Sri Lanka's minority Tamils, were concluded May 18 after the leadership of the rebels were killed in the fighting, ending a 26-year conflict.

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