

Thousands leave refugee camps in Sri Lanka

Thousands of refugees from the civil war in Sri Lanka Tuesday began leaving refugee camps six months after the government opened the camps, an official overseeing the refugees said.

Major General G.A. Chandrasiri said as many as 9,300 people left the camps the first day.

About 300,000 people were displaced in the final phase of the military offensive against the Tamil rebels in the northern part of the country. Since the war ended May 18, they have been living in camps guarded by the military.

This week, the government allowed free movement for the inmates of the camps for the first time. Earlier the government had selectively allowed some people to leave after undergoing security checks.

The government had been criticized for not allowing civilians to leave the camps, but the military claimed that security clearance was needed before releasing the refugees.

The main opposition party, the United National Party, said the government move was linked to the upcoming presidential elections and the government was trying to gain the support of minority Tamils by allowing people to leave the camps.

Presidential elections are due to be held Jan 26.

But the government said the move was to help the civilians get back to their homes as early as possible.

An estimated 120,000 people still remain in the refugee camps.

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