

More camps needed for Pakistan's displaced: UN

PM Gilani appeals for millions of dollars in aid

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

With thousands of people uprooted by violence in north-west Pakistan continuing to make their way to safety, the United Nations refugee agency said yesterday it is crucial to set up more camps and ensure speedy access to assistance.

Almost 1.5 million people have escaped fighting between Government troops and militants in the Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in recent weeks, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

"Thousands of displaced people continue to arrive in camps and to approach registration centres," UNHCR spokesperson Ron Redmond told reporters in Geneva yesterday, according to UN News centre.

He said that on average, some 100,000 people have been registered daily in the 89 registration points established in Mardan, Swabi, Nowshera, Peshawar, Kohat and Charsadda districts of NWFP.

With reports of thousands of new arrivals in Abbottabad, Manshera and Haripur districts, the agency is planning to help set up more registration centres to ensure the internally displaced persons (IDPs) can get the help they need as quickly as possible, he added.

Of the nearly 1.5 million people that have fled so far, some 131,000 people are staying in camps, with more than 1.3 million staying in private accommodation, with host families or friends, and some in schools.

The new influx is in addition to the over half a million people registered in NWFP who had fled other parts of the north-west, including the tribal areas, over several months since August 2008.

"Most of the 15 new camps established this month in response to the new influx are already full," noted Mr. Redmond. "There is an urgent need to identify new sites and establish new camps."

UNHCR is also helping the NWFP Ministry of Social Welfare to carry out a 'fast track' registration process to ensure people can get assistance. It is discussing with authorities a process to cross-check and verify data in a way that will identify duplicate registrations, inconsistencies and remove people from the earlier influx who may have returned home.

Agencies add: Meanwhile, Pakistan yesterday appealed for millions of dollars of urgent aid to relieve the growing crisis posed by the displacement of 1.5 million people who fled its blistering offensive against the Taliban.

The United Nations is scheduled to launch a formal appeal today to raise what Pakistan hopes will be half a billion dollars after tens of thousands of people flooded into camps with hundreds of thousands more staying elsewhere.

"There is an urgent need for a joint and comprehensive response to this issue by all those who are committed to fighting terrorism," Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani told a meeting of international donors.

"We have to win the hearts and minds of the people. We need to do something concrete and visible," Gilani said.

"The United Nations will launch a formal appeal on Friday to raise some 500 to 600 million dollars for Pakistan's IDPs", minister of state for finance Hina Rabbani Khar told a news conference after the donors' meeting.

She said representatives of around 40 countries and donor agencies attended talks in Islamabad yesterday, which she called "successful".

"We informed them of our three-pronged strategy, which includes immediate relief, safe return and rehabilitation of the displaced people and then reconstruction of the destroyed areas," said Khar.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani displaced civilians struggle for ice being distributed at the Chota Lahore camp at Swabi district, some 150 kms north-west of Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan boasted a military victory in a small Taliban stronghold but struggled to provide for 1.5 million people who fled its onslaught as fears grow of a lengthening crisis.

Suu Kyi's trial back behind closed doors

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar again barred diplomats and journalists from the trial of Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday, as international pressure mounted on the military junta to drop the case against the pro-democracy icon.

The regime had unexpectedly opened up the hearing at the notorious Insein prison for just one day on Wednesday, in an apparent concession to global criticism of its treatment of the Nobel Peace Prize winner.

But it clamped down again yesterday, despite a warning from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over the "outrageous" charges against the 63-year-old and a pledge by UN chief Ban Ki-moon to visit the country.

"Only for one day were diplomats and press allowed," a Myanmar official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

About 30 members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party, including the country's former longest serving political prisoner, Win Tin, kept up a vigil outside the prison as the trial resumed Thursday, witnesses said.

Aung San Suu Kyi faces up to

five years in jail if convicted of charges of breaching her house arrest, which stem from an incident earlier this month when an American man, John Yettaw, swam to her lakeside house.

Aung San Suu Kyi met envoys from Thailand, Singapore and Russia, expressing hope that "it was not too late for something good to come out of this unfortunate incident," a Singapore government statement said.

State television showed footage of her talking animatedly to the diplomats and said Aung San Suu Kyi had told the envoys she was in "good health and convenient accommodation has been provided."

Medical specialists had visited her Wednesday and she was receiving daily healthcare at the prison, it added.

Our Diplomatic Correspondent adds: The head of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has expressed his grave concern over the arrest and trial of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, coinciding with when her house arrest was due to end, to the leader of the ruling military junta.



PHOTO: AFP

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown (L) meets with actress Joanna Lumley at 10 Downing Street, in central London yesterday. Campaigners for Gurkha veterans voiced confidence Thursday that they had succeeded in forcing the British government into a policy U-turn to allow the former soldiers to settle in Britain.

Britain allows Gurkha soldiers to settle in UK

AFP, London

Britain announced yesterday that all of the Nepalese fighters who have served at least four years in the British army can apply to live in Britain.

The amended settlement guidelines, announced by Home Secretary Jacqui Smith in the House of Commons, were greeted by an explosion of applause and victory cries by Gurkhas and campaigners gathered outside parliament.

Gordon Brown has "made a brave decision on behalf of the bravest of the brave," said actress Joanna Lumley, who spearheaded the fight against residency restrictions on Gurkhas who retired before 1997.

"This will be received in Nepal today with the greatest joy and gratitude," added Lumley, whose father was a British major in the 6th Gurkha Rifles during World War II.

NEWS ANALYSIS Power sharing key to Lanka peace

AFP, Colombo

Its 30-year conflict over, Sri Lanka stands at a crossroads, with analysts saying only genuine power-sharing can open the new chapter of peace and prosperity promised by the island's hawkish government.

The Tamil Tiger rebels may finally have been crushed, but failure by the triumphant government to address the long-standing grievances of the Tamil minority could easily see the country slip back into violence.

"Armed struggle and separatism is defeated for the moment," said political columnist Sunanda Deshapriya.

"Sri Lanka can go down the road to reconstruction with reconciliation. Whether they will do that is the question. If not, we will be back to square one," Deshapriya said.

For the moment, at least, the benefit of the doubt is being given to President Mahinda Rajapakse who was elected on his promise to tame the Tigers.

In a victory address to parliament on Tuesday, the president sounded a conciliatory note and stressed the importance of a political response to Tamil demands.

"At this victorious moment, it is necessary for us to state with great responsibility, that we do not accept a military solution as the final solution,"

Rajapakse said.

Tamil moderates who had demanded equal rights with Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority were sidelined when the Tigers took up arms in 1972.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) went on to build a ruthlessly efficient guerrilla outfit and the ensuing conflict claimed up to 100,000 lives.

Sumanasiri Liyanage, a political science professor at the University of Peradeniya, said reforms were needed quickly to prevent the historical cycle repeating itself.

"Now that the war is over and Tamil extremism has been defeated, there will have to be some sort of political re-structuring of the Sri Lankan state," Liyanage said.

Terrance Purasinghe, a political science lecturer at Sri Jayewardenapura university, stressed that Tamil nationalism had not been eliminated along with the LTTE.

Neighbouring India has already started pressuring Sri Lanka to extend political power to the Tamils, and there has been similar lobbying from the United States and the island's main foreign aid donor Japan.

"A lasting peace in Sri Lanka depends on Sinhalese, Tamils and all other Sri Lankans working together to achieve new power sharing arrangements that safeguard and promote the rights of all," the US State Department said in a statement.

Five soldiers killed in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan said yesterday five soldiers and a number of militants were killed during fighting in a northwest valley where fighter jets and ground troops have pressed an offensive against the Taliban.

"In the last 24 hours, a number of miscreants-terrorists including important miscreant commander Abu Tariq were killed and seven miscreants were apprehended," the military said in a statement.

"Five soldiers embraced shahadat (martyrdom) and seven soldiers, including an officer were injured, in various areas of Swat," it added.

The military reported fighting in Pechar, a key Taliban bastion in northern Swat, the town of Kanju and around a Taliban supply line in Takhta Bund.



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