

Five priests, two nuns among those released from Sri Lankan camps

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka – Five Catholic priests and two women religious displaced by the Sri Lankan civil war and detained in refugee camps since May have been released.

“We appreciate the gesture and see it as a first step of the state government in moving in the right direction,” Oblate Father Paul Jayanthan Pachchek, director of the Oblate Social Service in the Mannar Diocese, told the Asian church news agency UCA News. “It will definitely give hope to other detainees.”

The government also ordered the release Aug. 26 of 177 Hindu priests and their families from camps in Vavuniya in the North.

Father Pachchek said the government must release all the people who remain in detention. He said the detainees should be helped to return to their “normal life in their villages.”

The five priests were weighing whether they should return to the camps to serve there or work in parishes as their bishops have asked, UCA News reported Aug. 28.

“It is an ethical dilemma,” acknowledged Father E.S.C. Mariathas of St. Anne’s Church in Mullaitivu, who spoke to UCA News by phone after his release.

Father Anthony Victor Sosai, vicar general of Mannar Diocese, also described the priests as “now in a dilemma about their future.” He confirmed that the bishops of Jaffna and Mannar had asked the priests to take other assignments.

The priests are mentally and physically drained, he added.

“They are still haunted by images of death and destruction from the war,” he said.

The two nuns who were released are now working with sick children who lost their parents in the war.

The Sri Lankan government declared victory after decades of civil conflict in mid-May when its troops overran the last enclave of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Since the mid-1970s the Tamil rebels had been fighting for autonomy for the predominantly Tamil areas of the Indian Ocean island.

Despite the end of hostilities, which claimed more than 80,000 lives, about 300,000 Tamil civilians are still languishing in refugee camps.

The military continues to screen refugees in the camps for possible rebel connections.

The priests and nuns were released at the military headquarters in Vavuniya in the presence of Basil Rajapaksa, a government minister and senior adviser to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, his brother.

All the freed priests were from the northern areas, including Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Mannar.

Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith of Colombo, Bishop Thomas Savundaranayagam of Jaffna, opposition parliamentarians, human rights activists and international organizations have appealed to the president to release all civilians and priests since the end of hostilities.

Conditions in the camps have worsened in recent weeks with the onset of monsoon rains, which have caused flooding, according to witnesses.

Pro-government Tamil leader Dharmalingam Siddarthan described conditions in the camps as “a living hell” after a recent visit.

According to media reports, the Sri Lankan government is preparing a 180-day resettlement plan for refugees to return to their homes. The government resettled 1,094 people from relief centers Aug. 5 in what was said to be the first phase of the program.