Refugees from Srilanka

What is the issue?

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- Over 1 lakh Sri Lankan Tamil refugees have been living in Tamil Nadu ever since the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983.
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- India and Sri Lanka should take up their repatriation at the earliest.
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What are the problems they face?

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- Recently, media focus has been on the Rohingya refugees in India.
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- But the plight of Lankan Tamil refugees, who have been here for nearly 35 years, has gone out of public consciousness.
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- The pathetic condition of shelters, restrictions on movement, and limited scope of livelihood opportunities affect the community.
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- The refugees also suffer from social and psychological problems as reports of suicides, school dropouts and child marriage show.
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- Many middle-aged refugees worry about their children’s future, given the fact that 40% of camp refugees are below 18 years.
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- Among the Hill country Tamils of central Srilanka (Tea estate Tamils of Indian origin) statelessness is a major problem.
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What have been the efforts to repatriate?

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- Tamil politicians in Srilanka have been very keen & positively inclined to get these people across the Palk Strait.
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- Also, as 28,500 refugees are said to be stateless, the Sri Lankan government, amended its laws to address this in 2009.
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- Indian government along with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also speeded up repatriation efforts in recent years.
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- Yet, the voluntary reverse flow of refugees hasn't been significant even after the end of the Eelam War in 2009.
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- In the past 8 years, hardly 10% of the refugee population (9,238 people) have gone back.
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What are the reasons?

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- **Pull Factor -** Over 62 thousand refugees have been receiving various relief measures of the Central and State governments.
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- Notably, Tamil Nadu government recently even announced measures to facilitate the refugees to take up professional courses.
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- Hence, regardless of the quality of housing and jobs, several refugees have experienced an improvement in their lifestyle.
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- Besides, a whole new generation has been raised completely in Tamil Nadu for whom Srilanka has become an alien country.
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- **Push factor –** Many refugees have no hope of a better future in Srilanka.
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- This feeling has strengthened by UNHRC surveys that have found a "lack of livelihood opportunities", for refugee who returned.
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- This situation may not improve in the near future given the state of the Sri Lankan economy.

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- Also, hill country refugees are landless and will not be inclined to go back unless provided land.
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- They also seem uninterested to work in tea plantations as labourers for meagre wages anymore.
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How does the future look?

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- Tamil Nadu holds the distinction of hosting the largest number of refugees in India.
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- While repatriation isn’t currently a priority for both India and Sri Lanka, it can’t be delayed for ever.
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- While for India a long-standing problem would be resolved, for Sri Lanka it would be a step towards ethnic reconciliation.
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- All concerned governments should come out with a fair package for repatriation, with due consideration for the aspirations of refugees.
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- For those who want to stay back, India can consider providing them citizenship, like how Pakistani refugees were given.
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Source: The Hindu

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