

## **Returning Home: Land, Displacement, and the Politics of Resettlement in Post-War Sri Lanka**

*This article examines the right to return for internally displaced persons within the context of post-war resettlement, focusing on Sri Lankan IDPs and the military-bureaucratic apparatus they must navigate to return home. It demonstrates how military interests and the political significance of contested territories continue to override humanitarian considerations in the Northern and Eastern provinces, producing ‘ethnocratic regimes’, or governance systems that privilege territorial control whilst marginalising ethnic minorities through spatial regulation. The author argues that land distribution continues to function as a tool of state-making and power consolidation, even as it appears to remedy decades of displacement. Ultimately, bureaucratic controls, militarised surveillance, and procedural barriers in accessing land serve to reinforce ethno-territorial politics, reframing religious and ethnic minority IDPs not as bearers of rights but as populations requiring management and control.*

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### **The NPP Government’s Promises and the Reality on the Ground**

The unresolved question of land in Sri Lanka’s Northern and Eastern provinces stands as perhaps the most tangible – and most symbolic – marker of the country’s unfinished post-war resettlement. Nearly two decades after the end of the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which fought for an independent Tamil homeland from 1983 to 2009, Tamil and Muslim families displaced by the conflict are still waiting to access lands that were occupied or expropriated during those years. This prolonged displacement reveals something fundamental: post-conflict resettlement

is never just a humanitarian or technical matter. It is deeply political, entangled in the broader project of how the state governs territory, and is bound up with questions of sovereignty, security, and power.

The election of the National People's Power (NPP) government in 2024 seemed to offer a turning point. When President Anura Kumara Dissanayake visited Jaffna in January 2025, he made a public pledge to expedite the return of military-held lands to their rightful owners. '[Land belonging to the people should rightfully remain with them](#),' he declared, framing land release as a moral obligation rather than mere policy adjustment – an acknowledgment of decades of displacement. For communities that had been waiting years, these words carried real weight. Land release has never been simply about regaining property. It means reclaiming dignity and the ability to rebuild lives on one's own terms. For people who spent years in temporary shelters or indefinite limbo, this promise resonated deeply.

But the initial optimism quickly ran into the structural and bureaucratic obstacles that have long defined Sri Lanka's post-war resettlement landscape. By mid-2025, large areas of land – particularly in strategic locations like [Valikamam North](#) – remained under military control. Some parcels were released, but often with conditions attached, subject to bureaucratic verification, and, in many instances, offering only nominal access. In [Myiliddy](#), the Jaffna District Secretary acknowledged that 234 acres released in 2025 could only be used exclusively for agriculture, with farmers required to leave by evening. They were prohibited from building shelters or staying overnight, restrictions that effectively maintained military control despite the formal release of land. In June, [communities in Mullaitivu](#) reported that even where resettlement was officially permitted, they faced serious obstacles such as difficulty getting electricity connections, restrictions on digging wells for cultivation, and barriers to accessing basic services.

What was supposed to be a return home became instead a complex negotiation with successive layers of authority and surveillance. These persistent obstacles reveal an enduring tension between what the state prioritises and what displaced populations actually need. While the NPP government tries to build political legitimacy and signal reconciliation, military interests and the political significance of these contested territories continue to override humanitarian considerations. The result is

a landscape where symbolic promises meet a very different reality on the ground. Families who expected restoration find themselves navigating partial releases and conditional access – a stark reminder that in Sri Lanka, land is never just soil. It remains the medium through which the state exercises authority and regulates who belongs where. The politics of land release thus becomes a window into the broader difficulties facing post-war reconciliation, or how to translate political will into administrative action, and how to shift from a security paradigm to one centred on rights and restoration.

Yet understanding why these promises faltered requires looking beyond the immediate failures of implementation. The obstacles facing the NPP's commitments are not simply bureaucratic bottlenecks or isolated resistance from military interests. They are symptoms of a deeper pattern – one embedded in how the Sri Lankan state has historically conceived of and governed its territory, particularly in ethnically diverse regions. To grasp why land return remains so fraught, and why even well-intentioned political promises repeatedly founder on the same rocks, we must examine the long history of how settlement, displacement, and territorial control have functioned as instruments of state power.

### **How Settlement Schemes Shape Territory and Power**

The patterns that frustrated the NPP's land release commitments in 2025 did not emerge from nowhere. They reflect a logic of territorial governance with deep historical roots – one in which settlement and land allocation have long served as tools of demographic management and political control. My research has shown that [resettlement programmes in the post-war North and East are not neutral acts of reconstruction](#). They are embedded in a framework of territorial consolidation and militarised development that operates at the intersection of security concerns, infrastructure planning, and demographic calculation. These programmes shape not just the physical landscape but the social and political possibilities available to people trying to return. How resettlement unfolds both reflects and reinforces particular visions of state authority and particular understandings of who belongs where and under what conditions. This pattern echoes what political geographers call '[ethnocratic regimes](#)': governance systems that privilege one ethnic group's territorial control while marginalising others.

The post-independence irrigation and colonisation schemes – Gal Oya, Mahaweli – fundamentally reshaped the ethnic and territorial landscape of the northeast, embedding Sinhala populations into Tamil-majority areas and consolidating state presence. [Patrick Peebles'](#) work on colonisation schemes demonstrates that these were never simply development initiatives. They were exercises in territorial control, designed to alter the demographic composition of politically sensitive regions and secure state authority in areas seen as potentially separatist or resistant. Scholars like [Sunil Bastian](#) have traced how land policy became a key instrument through which the postcolonial state sought to consolidate its authority in ethnically diverse peripheries. These historical precedents established a template of land distribution as a mechanism not merely of agricultural development but of territorial inscription, a means by which the state could physically embed its presence and authority into regions where its legitimacy was contested. During and after the civil war, this logic intensified: vast tracts of land in the North and East were designated as high-security zones, with thousands of acres remaining under military control even decades after hostilities ended in 2009.

What we witness in the post-war period, then, is not an aberration but a continuation. These dynamics persist, though in different forms. [Military and state actors](#) maintain control over strategically sensitive lands while settlement programmes unfold in ways that consolidate authority and regulate population distribution. The 2025 releases under the NPP government illustrate this continuity with remarkable clarity. Even when land is formally released, it comes with constraints that reproduce rather than resolve the underlying tensions. [Relocated housing](#) gets positioned outside original villages. Movement is [monitored or restricted](#). In places like [Keppapulavu](#), some land has been released, but many homes, schools, churches, and health care centres remain under military control. For residents there, returning doesn't mean restoration. Rather, it means negotiating with the continued imprint of war and state control. The land they have reclaimed bears little resemblance to what they remember. Boundaries have shifted. The very topology of village life has been fundamentally altered by years of military occupation and administrative reorganisation. In [Valikamam North in the Jaffna district](#), despite official approval for resettlement, large military camps, bungalows, and military-run commercial ventures such as resorts and shops continue to occupy private land. Ongoing restrictions on access to high-security zones have

limited Tamil families' ability to return, reshaping settlement patterns and constraining local economic recovery. These are not incidental complications in an otherwise well-meaning resettlement process. They are the structural expression of a governance logic that prioritises territorial control over the rights and needs of displaced populations.

All of this underscores how inseparable resettlement is from ethno-territorial politics. Land – particularly in areas formerly controlled by the LTTE or designated as high-security zones – carries historical, symbolic, and strategic weight that far exceeds its material value. Decisions about who can return, under what conditions, and to which plots are rarely neutral. Even when driven by [humanitarian concerns](#), resettlement operates within a [landscape structured by state and military priorities](#). It becomes both a material and political act, reconstituting communities while simultaneously reproducing hierarchies of control. The NPP's commitments in January 2025, however sincere in intent, collided with this entrenched logic. The president's promise confronted a governance apparatus that has long operated on precisely the opposite principle – that land, especially in the North and East, belongs first to the state's strategic imperatives, and only secondarily, conditionally, to its inhabitants.

Post-war North and East continue to experience what amounts to militarised development as a mode of governance. Infrastructure projects such as roads, schools, and housing complexes often operate under military oversight, reinforcing authority and surveillance. Even the basic act of rebuilding a home must pass through [bureaucratic approvals and security protocols](#). The continued presence of [military cantonments in civilian areas](#) means that surveillance and control remain woven into everyday life. These conditions show how settlement programmes function as instruments through which the state consolidates power and regulates post-war order. Development itself becomes a technology of governance, a means by which the state inscribes its authority onto the landscape and into people's daily lives.

This [militarisation of development](#) operates on multiple levels. Military personnel remain visible in resettlement areas, with their presence a constant reminder of the security apparatus that mediates return. Infrastructure projects prioritise strategic connectivity with roads designed for military movement and facilities serving dual civilian and

security purposes. The spatial organisation of resettlement schemes itself reflects security imperatives, with villages repositioned to enable surveillance. For returning families, this creates a particular kind of dislocation. As anthropologist Sharika Thiranagama writes, ['conversations about 'home' and belonging are also conversations about 'senses of possibility', about the expectations and possibilities of flourishing in the future'](#). But the militarised landscape fundamentally constrains these possibilities. The constant military presence shapes daily life in profound ways – [particularly for women](#), whose movement, economic opportunities, and domestic routines are all circumscribed by an atmosphere of surveillance that extends into the most intimate spheres of community and family life. What displaced people confront, then, is not just physical reconstruction but a deeper gap between what home used to mean and what it can offer now.

This historical and structural context explains why the NPP's promises in Jaffna could not translate straightforwardly into practice. The government inherited not just land tenure disputes, but an entire apparatus of territorial governance built on the premise that certain populations require surveillance and conditional permission, rather than recognition and rights. Therefore, the partial releases, the agricultural-only permissions, and the restrictions on overnight stays are not bureaucratic oversights but the predictable outputs of a system designed to maintain state control even as it gestures toward restitution. This is the deeper logic within which any resettlement initiative must operate, and it raises a fundamental question: can meaningful return occur when the very framework of governance treats displacement not as an injustice to be remedied but as a condition to be managed?

### **What Return Means When the State Still Controls Everything**

At the heart of this contradiction lies a fundamental tension between what the state seeks to preserve and what displaced populations need to reclaim. IDPs are not simply seeking physical restoration of property. They want restoration of agency, dignity, and social continuity. Land is not merely a commodity or even just livelihood. It is a repository of family history and community memory – the very ground on which autonomous life becomes possible. People's connection to land in these contexts runs deep, constituting not just where they live but who they can be. The state, however, prioritises control and strategic utility, subordinating these

human dimensions to broader governance and security goals. The collision of these logics produces a kind of liminal space where IDPs may occupy their ancestral lands but the conditions of that occupation remain heavily regulated and sometimes contingent on political or ethnic alignment.

This tension mirrors what scholars call the gap between [the right to return and the reality of return](#) – between legal entitlement and what proves actually possible on the ground. The gap is not incidental. It is structural and produced by the incompatibility between recognising displaced persons as rights-bearing citizens whilst treating them as security threats requiring ongoing management. When [farmers in Myiliddy](#) are permitted to cultivate but not to remain overnight, when [electricity connections are denied to resettled communities in Mullaitivu](#), when [churches and schools remain under military occupation in Keppapulavu](#) – these are not failures of policy implementation. They are the policy, insofar as the policy's unstated objective is to permit a semblance of return while maintaining the infrastructure of control.

International norms offer useful benchmarks for evaluating these processes, and they throw the Sri Lankan reality into sharp relief. [UNHCR guidance](#) emphasises that return must be voluntary, safe, and rights-based, stressing that resettlement should empower communities rather than impose solutions from above. This framework insists on people's right to choose whether and when to return, and on conditions that allow for dignified and sustainable reintegration. The [Pinheiro Principles](#) on housing and property restitution similarly affirm that displaced persons have the right not merely to return but to have their property restored or to receive compensation, and that this restitution should occur free from discrimination. In Sri Lanka, these principles remain aspirational. Access is often partial. Relocation may be involuntary in practice, as people face impossible choices between continued displacement and return under conditions of surveillance and restriction. The choice to return could be constrained by infrastructure limitations and military presence.

The gap between these international standards and Sri Lankan practice reveals something deeper than policy failure. It exposes the ethical stakes at the heart of post-war governance. Land restitution signals recognition of displacement. It gestures toward acknowledging historical wrongs and a willingness to reconcile the state with those it has marginalised. And it



also represents an opportunity for the state to demonstrate that it regards all citizens – regardless of ethnicity – as entitled to fundamental rights, including the right to return home. Conversely, continued withholding of land, or the imposition of conditions that hollow out the meaning of return, perpetuates injustice. It communicates that certain citizens' claims to place remain provisional and subject to revocation or limitation based on the state's strategic calculations. This is why land has become such a potent site of contestation in post-war Sri Lanka: it crystallises in physical form the question of whether Tamil and Muslim communities in the North and East are to be regarded as full citizens or as populations whose presence requires ongoing justification and management.

Recognising these ethical stakes makes clear that resettlement is as much a test of governance as it is a humanitarian exercise. The NPP government's promises to return land carry meaning only if they translate into tangible, rights-based outcomes that dismantle rather than reproduce the structures of control. Without transparent and accountable mechanisms, and without genuine participation from displaced communities in determining the terms of their return, resettlement risks becoming another iteration of the exclusionary patterns that have defined Sri Lankan territorial governance since independence. This makes land return inseparable from broader questions of justice and reconciliation. The pattern we have witnessed – the grand promise in Jaffna followed by the constrained reality on the ground – tests whether the state can move beyond viewing its Tamil and Muslim citizens primarily through a security lens and instead regard them as rights-bearing individuals entitled to return home without conditions that compromise their dignity or autonomy. The historical analysis suggests why this transformation proves so difficult: it requires not just policy adjustment, but a fundamental reimagining of how the state relates to its territorial peripheries and the communities that inhabit them.

Land restitution thus remains the truest measure of whether a post-war society can move beyond rhetoric toward substantive justice. Land is simultaneously home and history, which then remain inseparable in the act of dwelling. The promise made in Jaffna in January 2025 must be judged not by official announcements or hectares formally returned to civilian use, but by whether home becomes once again a place of uncontested belonging. And whether returning families can rebuild lives



that are dignified and whole and live on their own terms rather than under the watch of a security apparatus that views them with suspicion. Until that day arrives, the question of land in Sri Lanka's North and East will remain what it has been for two decades: the unfinished work of a post-war settlement that has yet to fully reckon with the structural violence that produced displacement in the first place, and that continues to shape the constrained possibilities of return.

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