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80 more Indians fly to Sri Lanka to clear landmines

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NEW DELHI: Over 80 former Indian soldiers have left for Sri Lanka following the defeat of the Tamil Tigers to join Indians already there in clearing thousands of buried landmines.

The new group has teamed up with compatriots working since 2003, mainly in the northern districts of Mannar and Vavuniya, in defusing mines laid by both the military and the Tigers during their prolonged conflict.

While 50 of the latest batch of Indians are attached to the Pune-based Horizon Group, 32 are from Sarvatra Technical Consultants, a company that is based in Gurgaon, Haryana. Sarvatra will send 32 more men.

Both are led by retired Indian Army officers who are proud of what they have achieved so far and are keen to help Sri Lanka now that it is engaged in post-war construction.

"It has been a wonderful opportunity," Horizon chief and retired Major General Shashikant Pitre told IANS over telephone from Pune, referring to the de-mining work.

"We are happy that we have been able to contribute to the building of Sri Lanka," added retired Major General Prem K. Puri, the director (operations) of Sarvatra.

Both Pitre and Puri said that Basil Rajapaksa, advisor to his brother and President Mahinda Rajapaksa, was immensely happy with the work the Indians were doing.

Sri Lanka is one of the world's most heavily mined areas. There are no precise estimates about the number of mines the military and the LTTE buried in the island's north and east over the past quarter century.

The mines have killed and maimed thousands -- Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims et al.

From 2003, Horizon and Sarvatra have been funded by Norway in the de-mining operations in the wake of an Oslo-brokered ceasefire. Although the truce later collapsed, the de-mining work did not halt.

The Indians were not the only ones clearing mines. Nearly a dozen companies were engaged in the task including one from Denmark. The Sri Lankan military is also now defusing mines in a big way.

Besides Mannar and Vavuniya, the Indian companies also cleared mines in Batticaloa in the east. Horizon also worked in the neighbouring districts of Trincomalee and Amparai.

All de-mining is done under the care of the National Steering Committee, a government body in Colombo.

After Sri Lanka crushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May this year, the Indian government also decided to provide separate funds to Horizon and Sarvatra as part of stepped up aid to the island nation.

The 82 Indians who have gone now are an outcome of the Indian funding.

Both Indian companies have shared their skills with Sri Lankans they have employed over the years.

It wasn't easy though when it all began.

"There were lots of problems in the beginning," said Puri, referring to the 2003 period when the Norway-sponsored ceasefire brought a semblance of peace to Sri Lanka. The LTTE then effectively controlled the northeast.

"LTTE people were initially suspicious. They wanted to know why (retired) Indian Army people were in Sri Lanka," he said.

The suspicion arose from months of fighting between the LTTE and the Indian Army in Sri Lanka's northeast in 1987-90.

In the absence of records, there was no clear idea where exactly the mines had been laid. And since this was humanitarian de-mining, extra care had to be taken, making it more time-consuming and difficult.

How long will it take for Sri Lanka to be cleared of mines?

According to Pitre, it will take one-and-a-half to two years to do away with most landmines and another year to declare the areas safe for habitation.

Added Puri: "From a distance it might seem as if we are working slowly. That is not so. We have to clear every bit of land carefully, inch by inch. It is a meticulous operation."

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