

September 29, 2005

Contacts:

Joel Charny & Sarah Martin

Sri Lanka: Tsunami Survivors Yearn for Permanent Housing and Employment

Nine months after the devastating tsunami that struck Sri Lanka on December 26, 2004, the approximately 800,000 people directly affected by the disaster face tremendous uncertainty.

The transition to the phase of long-term recovery is lagging. Priorities for immediate action include resolving land allocation policies to enable the construction of permanent housing to accelerate and organizing programs to provide productive assets to people so that they can begin to meet their economic needs.

While the survivors are now largely out of tents and in transitional shelters, the vast majority have no idea where their permanent house will be, nor whether they will be able to go back to the livelihoods that supported them. "We've been living here for a long time now," said one woman in Galle, "It's time for the Government of Sri Lanka to give us permanent housing." Many, especially children, are still afraid to go near the ocean and rumors of another impending disaster are frequent. While the slow pace of building new housing and providing support for employment and income generation activities is understandable given the scope of the disaster, immediate actions are possible to resolve some of the uncertainties that the survivors are facing.

One essential step is to restore personal documentation that was lost in the waves. Birth certificates, ID cards, marriage certificates, and land deeds are all essential to re-establishing an individual's stake in society, thus facilitating the recovery process. Pro-bono legal support to families throughout the island is critical, and current efforts by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and NGOs need to be expanded.

While the overall condition of transitional shelter is adequate, problems exist depending on the location. "This place is not healthy for my children," complained one woman. "The houses are too close together and disease could spread."

"I killed a big snake in here yesterday," a young mother of two told RI, "I am anxious for my new house so my children can study properly and be safe." The Govern-

ment and the aid agencies were unable to develop and enforce clear standards for the quality of the shelter provided. The RI team saw widely varying sizes and quality of temporary shelter across the island. Small units with tin roofs are practically ovens in the blazing tropical sun. "I live in a bakery now," complained one woman, "it is much too hot to live in this house." Tin roofing is also noisy and potentially dangerous in high winds. Wood units are experiencing termite infestations, creating dust that is causing respiratory problems. Some housing sites are in areas that normally flood during the rainy season, which is about to start in the east. The fear is that the monsoon season in the east will create secondary displacement due to the poor quality and location of some of the shelters.

Regardless of the design, almost all the temporary housing consists of just two small rooms, cramped quarters for larger families. The displaced frequently raised the lack of privacy as a concern, and one mother expressed particular concern for her 17-year-old daughter in such close quarters. "There is very little privacy for my daughter – she is becoming a woman. She needs her privacy."

The Government of Sri Lanka has imposed buffer zones of 100 meters from the coastline in the south and 200 meters in the north and east, with no settlement, reconstruction, and new development allowed within the zones. Since the December tsunami was a once-in-a-millennium event, the justification for the buffer zone is unclear. Enforcement of the buffer zone policy has been inconsistent at best. Along the southern coast, the RI team saw numerous hotels and restaurants that had been quickly rebuilt within the zone. Donor projects are said to be explicitly barred, but in South Weligama just north of Galle town an Italian aid project is building permanent houses, which resemble two-story villas with tile roofs and balconies, between the coastal highway and the ocean, well inside the buffer zone. Meanwhile, fisher-

men languish in temporary housing several kilometers away from the ocean, with the prospect of being permanently resettled as much as five or six kilometers away from the coast. "This area that we are in is nice," said a young mother of two, "but it is five kilometers from the sea. How will we live when we are fishermen?"

The magnitude of the housing challenge is immense. Approximately 85,000 new units are needed. As of September 1, 1,126 are complete and construction of another 15,619 is underway. There are certain to be problems of equity given the many actors involved in housing construction. One government scheme provides villagers able to rebuild on their own land with \$2,500 in three installments for a new house that they construct themselves. This is a sensible approach, but will be resentment if others are eligible for housing built by foreign donors costing up to four times this amount.

Plans for rebuilding livelihoods are, if anything, even less clear. With so many fishermen affected, the fishing industry has been the priority sector for economic revitalization. But the basic approach has been to supply boats, not all of which have been suitable, in such numbers that RI was told by an NGO official that 120% of the pre-tsunami fishing fleet had been restored. "A lot of the boats that were sent were inappropriate," a government official told RI, "some were too big; the fishermen need boats that can't be capsized by crocodiles in the lagoon." In the course of RI's travel to the southern and eastern coastline, anomalies abounded: we were told of some fishermen getting six boats and selling them off, yet most fishermen we spoke to had yet to receive a single boat; some fishermen have boats, but no nets or motors. A common sight in NGO compounds throughout the country is a stack of boats waiting to be distributed.

The other problem is that even fishing families depend on a range of activities to meet their basic needs. The monolithic focus on the fisheries sector has neglected other sources of livelihood, such as handicrafts and agriculture. RI visited one Muslim village in Batticaloa in which each household had had a loom prior to the tsunami; as of mid-September no effort had been made to supply looms to these households, even on a credit basis, so that they could re-start their weaving activities. RI also interviewed a boat builder in the south who had lost all his power tools; he seemed to be a perfect candidate for a small loan to get his boat building business back on a firmer footing.

The tsunami recovery is taking place within an increasingly polarized political context. Far from facilitating reconciliation, the tsunami emergency has exacerbated fault lines within Sri Lankan society. Implementation of the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS), a carefully negotiated agreement between the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam for managing the fair distribution

of the tsunami aid, has stalled while the agreement is challenged in court by Sinhalese nationalist parties opposed to any agreement with the LTTE. Muslim leaders feel they were excluded from the agreement, despite being granted representation on district planning and coordination structures, and interpret government inefficiencies in allocating aid as deliberate discrimination.

Meanwhile, whether the result of conscious Government policy or the energy and size of the private sector, Sinhalese majority areas in the south are rapidly rebuilding, while coastal areas in the north and east, whether controlled by the Government or the LTTE, show few signs of substantial reconstruction. With Presidential elections planned for November, major policy decisions, on the buffer zone and implementation of the P-TOMS, for example, are on hold. The conflicts, delays, and inequities do not bode well for the immediate future of Sri Lanka.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The Government of Sri Lanka and international aid agencies make immediate contingency plans for improving transitional shelters or finding alternative sites in the event that monsoon rains make living in the current housing untenable.
- ❑ The Government of Sri Lanka remove the buffer zone and allow families that wish to live and work within the zone to do so.
- ❑ The Government of Sri Lanka accelerate the provision of cash grants to families able to initiate the rebuilding of their homes on their pre-tsunami homesteads.
- ❑ International and local agencies expand their provision of pro-bono legal assistance to tsunami-affected families.
- ❑ Even with implementation of the P-TOMS suspended, international aid donors insist that core principles of equity, conflict prevention, disaster prevention, and sustainability be adhered to in the recovery phase.
- ❑ The Government of Sri Lanka and international and local agencies move quickly to provide equipment and cash needed for families to resume their full range of livelihood activities.

Vice President for Policy Joel Charny and Advocate Sarah Martin just returned from a three-week assessment mission to Sri Lanka.