

Reconstruction

Justice denied

An alliance in Sri Lanka is fighting for effective systems of relief for the tsunami victims

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 caused severe damage to the Sri Lankan coastal communities. This may have been the biggest ever destruction to affect the communities in the last couple of centuries. The number of deaths reported was 40,000, making Sri Lanka the second worst affected country, after Indonesia. The number of houses that were totally destroyed was 70,000. The worst damage occurred to the fisheries sector and the coastal environment. Ordinary citizens took the lead in providing support to the tsunami victims, before the government even began to think of what to do for relief.

The attention from foreign governments, donors, financial institutions and the general public was very high — from the United Nations Secretary General to the World Bank Chairperson, from two former United States Presidents to the Prince of Wales, and from hundreds of media personnel, all of whom visited the tsunami-affected areas. The number of new local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that applied for registration has exceeded 3,000. The number of international NGOs supporting the tsunami victims has risen from 50 to 150. A lot of pledges and commitments were made by the NGOs, various government agencies and the general public. Still, even three months after the devastation, problems relating to potable drinking water, sanitation and temporary shelters were not properly addressed by the government.

Immediately after the tsunami, the Sri Lankan government announced 100-m buffer zones along the southern and western coasts, and 200-m buffer zones along the eastern and northern coasts, where no construction of any kind would be allowed, all in the name of security of

the coastal dwellers. This directive had a very negative impact, as NGOs and other supporters found it difficult to find land for reconstruction work. Much before the government announced its own reconstruction plans, NGOs, civil society organizations, companies, media institutions and some businessmen came forward to build houses for the tsunami victims. Despite such widespread involvement for housing, acquiring land remained the biggest problem for the people involved in reconstruction. The government imposed a state of emergency in the name of implementing essential services for the victims, and the authority for rehabilitation and reconstruction of tsunami-affected areas was handed over to the Urban Development Authority (UDA), including the authority to allocate land for housing for the tsunami victims.

The major tasks of the UDA are:

- enforcement of planning and building regulations for the conservation zone
- facilitating permanent relocation for affected families living on the conservation zone
- facilitating reconstruction of damaged houses in affected areas
- reconstruction of affected townships

Housing project

Thus, the role of the UDA is to regulate the entire process of rehabilitation and reconstruction. On 15 January 2005, the Executive President and Prime Minister laid the first foundation stone for housing at the Prime Minister's district at Hambantota. Subsequently, a number of such functions were reported at Galle,

Matara, Gampaha and Kalutara districts on the western and southern coasts.

Nevertheless, these schemes have not been completely implemented and there are still no proper plans for the housing projects; even schemes for temporary shelters are not being implemented. The victims continue to suffer in the available huts under alternating conditions of heavy rain and unbearable heat.

Several NGOs have become frustrated with the land allocation issue and other regulations imposed on their activities, and their eventual withdrawal from the scene will only make the victims more vulnerable and prolong their hardship.

The Executive President appointed a special planning committee called the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) to oversee the development activities. But TAFREN is made up of only top-class business representatives, who are very close to the Executive President.

None of the local development experts are represented in the task force, and no consultation was made with the affected communities. TAFREN's blueprint for rebuilding the nation clearly shows a priority to strengthen the ongoing liberalization and privatization process through providing infrastructure facilities to the business community.

No proper reconstruction mechanism has been proposed by TAFREN for the fisheries industry. Neither has the fisheries ministry prepared or announced any plan. Civil society organizations, trade unions and co-operatives in the fisheries sector have not been invited for any planning work to rebuild fisheries industry. But we hear of big plans from the European Union to provide some unused fishing trawlers as tsunami aid to Sri Lanka .

Recently, TAFREN announced plans to rebuild the tourism industry of the country. But no such plans have been prepared for rebuilding the livelihoods of the fisher people. No effective mechanism has been identified to repair damaged boats and replace destroyed fishing gear, despite receiving millions of dollars from various governments and international financial institutions.

Rehab plans

No plans have been prepared for the rehabilitation of women, children and the elderly. Some international agencies have pledged to help develop disaster prevention and management systems. But the Sri Lankan government views the 100-m or 200-m buffer zones as the only solution for the security of coastal communities from future tsunamis. No professional trauma care facilities have been provided by the government, and even NGOs have only unorganized and ineffective arrangements.

Even as these difficulties are making life miserable for the people, the government wants to accelerate construction of the southern super-highway, privatization of the Eppawala phosphate mines, and construction of the Upper Kotmale hydroelectric power plant and the Norochcholai coal power plants.

Amidst all these difficulties, the victims are afraid to raise their voices, as the government has enforced a state of emergency. Nonetheless, some social movements and trade unions have come forward to resist the government plans to strengthen and accelerate liberalization, privatization and infrastructure building programmes. The Alliance for the Protection of National Resources and Human Rights (ANRHR), an alliance of social movements, NGOs and trade unions, has demanded the following:

1. The government must immediately establish efficient and effective systems for relief, ensuring the well-being of vulnerable groups, particularly children (by supplying adequate nutrition and restarting schooling without delay), and women (by providing appropriate housing and sanitation facilities), equally to all areas of the country.
2. A people's planning commission must be established to replace TAFREN to decide on how to assist the affected people to rebuild lives. This commission must be made up of people with expertise and experience in working in disaster areas, who are able to represent the interests of affected people from all areas of the country.
3. All donations and aid money received by the government must be spent in ways that the affected people deem fit. No loans should be taken by the government without consulting the affected people. The affected people must have access to clear and comprehensive information on the monies received and allocated by the government.
4. The majority of the people displaced by the tsunami belong to fishing communities. These people have a historical and traditional right to the coastal lands and the seas, which must be

upheld. They should not be displaced to make way for tourists or the business elite. They should decide how to protect themselves from possible future disasters of this kind

5. All people displaced by the tsunami must immediately be granted their rights to return to their land if they wish. They must be allowed to decide on the type of housing, sanitation facilities, and health and education services that the government should provide.

6. All people displaced by other phenomena, particularly those affected by the war who have lived in camps for as long as 15 years, should also be treated in the same way. This implies the abandonment of the high-security zone in the northern and eastern parts of the country.

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