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Sri Lanka: Imperative to Respond to Needs of Conflict Displaced

The 20-year civil war in Sri Lanka displaced more than 800,000 people, equal to the number affected by the December 2004 tsunami.

The conflict-displaced have received subsistence assistance, but far less than what they require to re-establish their lives. The stark contrast between the meager funds available for the conflict-affected displaced and the generous outpouring of funds to assist survivors of the tsunami is unjust. The international community and the government of Sri Lanka must act immediately to rectify this injustice if Sri Lanka is to achieve stability and peace.

The generous reaction of the international community to the December 2004 tsunami is evident from the moment one arrives along the southeastern and southern coast of Sri Lanka. Signs announcing the projects of international humanitarian agencies line the roadways. For the conflict-displaced, however, the experience of assistance has been much different. Nadukuddirppu, a village 90 minutes drive up the eastern coast from Batticaloa town, encapsulates the contrasts and contradictions of the current situation in Sri Lanka. "The Sri Lankan army entered our houses and burned them to the ground in April 1994," said an elder leader of the village. "The army threatened us and told us not to report them." After residents re-built the destroyed houses on their own, they had to flee and hide in the forest in 1995 when the army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) battled in the area. The village received no international assistance during and after this cycle of violence.

It took the December 2004 tsunami to elicit assistance to the village. The destruction was not total. Residents lost fishing boats and gear but their houses were not destroyed. They are therefore considered "secondary affected" and have received some support, but not funds for housing improvements or household goods. The president of the village's rural development society asked pointedly, "In other tsunami-affected areas they were given bicycles and everything. We are worried. Why have they ignored us?"

Away from the coast, the situation for the conflict-affected displaced persons living in camps, known as "welfare centers," is grim. About 80,000 people remain in these centers, which are located in former schools, warehouses, and other public facilities in government-controlled districts such as Vavuniya, Mannar, and Puttalam.

Refugees International visited the Poonthotham Welfare Center in Vavuniya and was shocked by the poor conditions there. The disparity was especially obvious compared to the relatively fine transitional shelter locations for the tsunami displaced in the south that we had just visited. The 1,400 residents of Poonthotham, a former school, live in rows of tiny shelters, with no light or air, blackened from years of cooking inside with charcoal. The school in the camp goes only up to Grade 5 and other services have diminished over time. An elderly man told RI, "When we first came to this camp at the beginning [in 1996] there were so many facilities. But they are gone now and we don't know why. We would like to resettle in an area where we can live." Another man added, "Every year we go [to the government] and request to be resettled. We are fighting to resettle."

Most of the residents of Poonthotham are "estate Tamils," ethnic Tamils of Indian origin who worked as virtual indentured servants on tea plantations in the hills of central Sri Lanka. They fled communal rioting to the LTTE zones in 1983, but they were unable to establish themselves before having to flee again. Now, after being displaced by the conflict in the 1990s and languishing in camps in Vavuniya for eight years or longer, the former estate Tamils are especially vulnerable as they have no home community to which they can return. The only realistic solution is for them to be "relocated" to new land in Vavuniya or other districts. The Government, however, has been reluctant to support relocation outside of LTTE areas for fear of upsetting the ethnic balance in districts under its control.

The situation for the 380,000 conflict-affected internally displaced who chose to return after the ceasefire is almost as precarious, especially for the 250,000 who returned to the Vanni, the core area of LTTE control in north central Sri Lanka. Governmental and international support to the return process has been significantly less than needed, largely because it took place in the context of a ceasefire rather than a final peace accord that would have assured potential donors that a return to conflict was unlikely. Rather than investing in reconstruction to create conditions for peace, donors chose to offer the possibility of major investment as an enticement to the Government and the LTTE to reach a permanent accord. But while the Government and international donors decided not to risk investment immediately in the north, the displaced have risked their own lives on the peace process by returning with their families. They are the ones that are bearing the consequences of the meager support to the overall reconstruction process.

Funding for the housing situation in the Vanni is emblematic of the overall problem. Money for housing is not a problem in tsunami-affected areas where the government of Sri Lanka and humanitarian agencies are under fire for not building permanent shelters fast enough. Meanwhile, the conflict-displaced in Vanni have been living in temporary shelters made of thatch for as long as three years (on top of many years in camps) primarily because of lack of funds. The World Bank initiated a pilot housing project for returning conflict-displaced people in 2004 which supported the construction of 600 permanent houses. The main phase of the Northeast Housing Reconstruction Project is due to begin shortly. It will fund the construction of 32,000 houses for conflict-displaced, which will take four years and still falls short of meeting the overall need for houses.

The contrast between the instant mobilization on behalf of tsunami survivors and the historic neglect of the conflict-displaced has been too great for the Sri Lankan Government and citizens, as well as the donor community, to ignore. Some Government officials have expressed a renewed determination to address the terrible conditions in the welfare centers through resettlement and relocation programs. Senior staff of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Colombo told RI that they will be seeking Government approval and donor funding for a program to conduct a census among the remaining welfare center residents and relocate the most vulnerable by the end of 2006. The European Commission humanitarian agency, ECHO, and the U.S. Agency for International Development have both endorsed the concept of allowing tsunami funds to be used in "affected districts," which would allow partner agencies to respond to displacement throughout a given dis-

trict regardless of the original cause. Non-governmental organizations should apply the concept of affected districts to their ample private funds as well.

If implemented, these measures will mitigate some of the worst aspects of the neglect of the conflict-displaced, but the core issue impeding comprehensive action is the lack of progress towards an overall peace settlement. The signs are deeply discouraging. The eastern districts of Batticaloa and Trincomalee are more militarized than they were in March 2001, prior to the ceasefire. In early September, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was assassinated in Colombo, an act that had all the hallmarks of an LTTE operation, though they have denied responsibility. The LTTE has closed its public offices in government-controlled districts in the east and withdrawn their officials. Presidential elections are scheduled for November 22 and the ruling party candidate, current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, is running in an alliance with two Sinhala nationalist parties that have vowed to abrogate the agreement with the LTTE on the sharing of international tsunami funding while expressing deep skepticism about the utility of further peace negotiations. In this context, a comprehensive reformulation of the donor strategy for Sri Lanka, as embodied in the agreements of the Tokyo Donor Conference, is not possible.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ☐ Donors clarify to their implementing partners that tsunami funds may be used throughout tsunami-affected districts and partner agencies take advantage of this flexibility to respond rapidly to the needs of conflict-displaced persons;
- ☐ Non-governmental humanitarian agencies begin sensitizing their private donors about the need to assist conflict-affected displaced persons and then expand programs for them;
- ☐ Donors increase their support to UNHCR to continue their assistance to conflict-displaced;
- ☐ The Government of Sri Lanka and UNHCR agree on a plan for the relocation of the most vulnerable individuals from the welfare centers and complete the relocation process by the end of 2006 at the latest;
- ☐ Donors increase their support for other programs benefiting conflict-displaced persons who have returned to their home communities, focusing on housing and livelihood;
- ☐ The Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery highlight the issue of the needs of conflict-displaced persons by visiting a welfare center on his next trip to Sri Lanka.

Vice President for Policy Joel Charny and Advocate Sarah Martin assessed the displaced situation in Sri Lanka in September.