

Two years after the Asian tsunami: Sri Lankan survivors face civil war and squalor

By Panini Wijesiriwardane
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It is two years since the Asian tsunami devastated large swathes of coastline in 14 countries, including Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand. At least 230,000 people died and 1.7 million were left homeless after the huge waves swept away tens of thousands of homes, schools and hospitals. The poor were the hardest hit, losing their homes, family members, scanty possessions and livelihoods.

After Indonesia, Sri Lanka was the second worst affected country. More than 35,000 people were killed, around 120,000 houses destroyed and 516,150 people displaced. Two years later, many are still living in squalid temporary accommodation, struggling to survive from day to day with little or no government assistance.

In an official message this week, President Mahinda Rajapakse piously called for “unity among the diverse community in order to face the challenges and build a safer nation”. His government has proclaimed December 26—the day the tsunami struck—as Sri Lanka’s “National Safety Day”.

Rajapakse’s hypocrisy is breathtaking. In the first year after the tsunami, as prime minister, he presided over the government’s totally inadequate relief operations. Attempts to establish joint relief operations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were stymied by the opposition of Sinhala chauvinist groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

As a candidate in the November 2005 presidential election, Rajapakse promised to solve the severe housing shortages created by the tsunami “within six months.” He also pledged to create a permanent peace, despite signing a formal election agreement with the JVP that included a more aggressive stance against the LTTE.

Over the past year, far from establishing “unity”,

Rajapakse and his government have plunged the country back to civil war. The coastal areas in the war zones of the east and north were among the most damaged by the tsunami. Those under LTTE control have received little or no government assistance. Now the victims confront further devastation wrought by Sri Lankan military offensives and indiscriminate bombing.

Like all his other election promises, Rajapakse failed to provide proper housing for tsunami victims within six months. While tens of thousands of people lack the basic essentials of life, his government has boosted the defence budget by 45 percent to prosecute a communal war.

According to the Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA), of the 114,069 permanent houses needed only 63,469 have been completed. The rebuilding or repair of 47,859 is currently in progress.

Most new houses have been constructed by the non-government organisations (NGOs), in some cases with funding from international agencies such as the World Bank. Home owners are responsible for the rebuilding or repair of their houses—receiving 250,000 rupees (\$US2,500) for a full restoration and 100,000 rupees for a partial restoration. As soon as the money is provided, the house is added to the completion statistics.

The standard of new housing is poor. Most housing projects lack proper access roads and internal roads. Some houses have been built on steep slopes and risk collapse. One can already see cracked walls, broken doors and windows, and damp floors. Many do not have running water, drainage and proper garbage disposal systems.

The tsunami displaced 60,280 families in the eastern districts of Amparai, Batticaloa and Trincomalee and

43,382 are still in temporary shelters. Thousands of these families have now been displaced again by the war. In the northern Jaffna, Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi districts, 16,433 families were displaced and 11,641 are still living in temporary camps.

Care International said it was able to fulfill about 90 percent of the target number of new houses in the south of the island. In the north, however, it met only 10 percent of its target. NGOs have been subjected to a barrage of communal accusations by Sinhala extremist organisations such as the JVP, alleging they have provided assistance to the LTTE. Restrictions have now been imposed on their operations in the war zones.

Much of the temporary accommodation is grossly inadequate. Many shelters are made of tin sheeting and have leaky roofs of palm leaves. There is a shortage of toilets and those that do exist often overflow in heavy rain. Unhygienic conditions have led to a variety of skin and waterborne diseases. Many families have no hope of getting new dwellings. Anyone who found shelter with relatives after the tsunami, or married in the relief camps, is no longer eligible for a new house.

Schools and hospitals have not been rebuilt. According to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), only 18 of the schools that were destroyed have been rebuilt. Only 38 of the 255 partially damaged schools have been repaired. As a result, about 30 percent of children have no schools. An education ministry official told the *Daily Mirror* that the rebuilding of 25 schools in Jaffna and Mullaitivu and 13 schools in Trincomalee had been put on hold due to the "security situation".

The IPS found a similar situation with hospitals and clinics. Reconstruction and repair had only been completed on 33 medical institutions. Work on 69 more was still in progress, but had not even started on the remaining 189.

A study by economist Muttukrishna Sarvananthan has revealed that over the past two years, the level of poverty among tsunami survivors in the north, east and south has increased from 64 percent to 80 percent. The government has ended its limited financial assistance to survivors, claiming they now have employment. But the study showed that the jobless level among the victims has increased from 37 percent to 54 percent.

The social crisis confronting those whose lives were devastated by the tsunami is an indictment not only of

the Sri Lankan government, but of those world leaders such as US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who, belatedly, promised to help the victims.

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