

Tsunami rehabilitation in Sri Lanka: A brief outline

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On 26 December 2004, devastating earthquakes along the western coast of Northern Sumatra, the Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands caused tsunamis to sweep over south and southeast Asia, reaching as far as the shores of East Africa and producing one of the worst natural disasters in modern history. Those countries worst affected were India, Indonesia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, with others, including Myanmar and Somalia also suffering damage and loss of life. Countries less severely affected by the tsunami included Bangladesh, Kenya, Malaysia, the Seychelles and Tanzania. In total, more than 170,000 people are thought to have died. Overall, an estimated two million people have been directly or indirectly affected, of whom 1.7 million are internally displaced. The damage and destruction of infrastructure has destroyed people's livelihoods, leaving many homeless and without adequate water, sanitation, food and healthcare facilities.

Impact of the tsunami

Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean, lying east of the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, from which it is separated by the Palk Strait. Sri Lanka is about the size of Tasmania, with an area of 66,000 square kilometers, including 870 square kilometers of inland waters.

When the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, more than 31,000 lives were lost, more than 15,000 were injured, livelihoods were severely damaged, and an approximate 443,000 people were displaced. In addition, the number of women and children among the dead was disproportionately high. More than 900 children became orphans or were separated from their parents. These children, along with widows, single-parent households, the elderly and disabled, comprise especially vulnerable groups in terms of psycho-social distress, restoration of livelihoods, and legal and protection rights. As such, these groups required special support during the recovery phase. According to government statistics, total loss and damage would cost about USD 1.5 billion. This includes the damage of schools, the health sector, housing, agriculture and livestock, electricity and water supplies, sanitation, transportation infrastructure, the fisheries sector and the tourism sector. The government encountered critical challenges in reducing the immediate suffering resulting from the effects of the disaster; restoring livelihoods and basic services; and starting the recovery and reconstruction process.

The statistics of persons affected by the tsunami as of 3 January 2005

District	Deaths	Injured	Missing	Displaced
Colombo	76		12	16,139
Gampaha	7			32,000
Kalutara	213	421	48	37,595
Galle	4,101	2,500		120,000
Matara	1,205	8,288	404	41,900
Hambantota	4,500			27,351
Ampara	10,436	120		183,527
Mullaitivu	3,000	2,500	1,300	24,557
Batticaloa	2,497	1,166	1,097	203,807
Trincomalee	957		335	51,863

Killinochchi	560	147	56	49,129
Jaffna	2,640	541	540	48,729
Puttlam	4			850
Vavuniya				641
Total	30,196	15,683	3,792	838,088

Source:

District

Secretariats

(These figures are tentative, as reported by the respective District Secretariats)

Although these communities have been traumatized, they have demonstrated a strong sense of cohesion in mobilizing themselves into groups to remove rubble and distribute relief supplies.

Initial reconstruction

Immediately after the tsunami, the international community responded with unprecedented generosity and solidarity towards the rescue and relief efforts of the affected communities and authorities. With more than USD 6 billion being pledged for humanitarian emergency relief and reconstruction assistance, considerable resources were available to Sri Lanka for relief and recovery activities.

With these resources, the Sri Lankan government successfully rebuilt and repaired damaged roads, electricity and water supplies, and the sanitation system within 2-3 months after the tsunami. While these infrastructural developments are a cause for celebration, after four years, there are people still living in tsunami camps in various parts of the country. Immediately after the tsunami, the Sri Lankan government together with various NGOs provided for the basic needs of survivors, such as water, food, shelter, clothes and medicines without any discrimination. The authorities put survivors in common camps located at schools, temples and churches. They were then divided into two categories: permanent family and non-permanent family. Those who had their own houses prior to the tsunami were categorized as permanent, while those who didn't, who had lived in rented houses, were categorized as non-permanent. Both categories were given temporary houses in the camps. [photo 1 & 2]

Victims received cash donations for the first 3-4 months after the tsunami. The government and other organizations gave out Rs 5000 per family per month for four months. They also received a ration card worth Rs 200 per person per week for three months, for dry rations. The government further gave out Rs 2500 to buy other necessary items like cooking pots, tables and so forth. International organizations and local authorities together conducted health programmes, such as counseling and medical clinics, which were very useful. In the camps, most families survived by doing small jobs. Most of the families have more than four members and are living in a small room with few facilities. According to those still in the camps today, they live with the hope of eventually having their own houses. The government has apparently announced that all permanent families will get houses, but not the non-permanent families.

All of the children living in the camps are continuing their studies; the government has provided the necessary facilities for this.

Government initiatives for future protection in the case of natural disasters

- A Parliamentary Select Committee was appointed to review the disaster risk management status of the country and make recommendations.
- An Interim Committee on Early Warning System was set up.
- In May 2005, the Government of Sri Lanka passed the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act No 13 of 2005 in the Parliament.

- The National Council for Disaster Management (NCDM) was established, in accordance with the act.
- The Disaster Management Centre (DMC) was established under the National Council for Disaster Management (NCDM) as the lead agency on disaster risk management in the country in implementing the directives of the NCDM.
- In December 2005, the Ministry for Disaster Management was established. On January 2006, this Ministry was renamed as the Ministry of Disaster Management & Human Rights.

What happened to the money...

The Sri Lankan government received more than USD 6 billion in post-tsunami aid. According to reports, the government needed only USD 1.5 billion for reconstruction and development. Nearly USD 1 billion has been spent on the basic needs of the survivors. It is very clear there should be more money.

The government's infrastructure developments have been satisfactory, as was its passing of the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act No 13 of 2005. And yet, there are still many families are suffering in the tsunami camps all around the country. The situation of people in the north and east is worse than that of the south, due to civil war. Reports and victim testimonies suggest that people get more facilities from international and local organizations than from the government. Days after the tsunami, INGOs were among the first to deliver emergency relief. Through cash-for-work activities, communities were mobilized to clean up debris, while putting money into their pockets.

Corruption in post-tsunami aid delivery however, has been reported from all parts of Sri Lanka by the local and international media. Many actors in the field are involved in corrupt practices due to personal greed. In the north and east, corruption is mainly instigated by the LTTE. In the east, the government, LTTE, and NGO/INGO personnel are all involved in corrupt practices. These have badly affected the people, allowing for their continuous suffering at the tsunami camps.