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National Network

UNDP's disaster training was just a year away

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CUDDALORE, DECEMBER 30 It's a question that will haunt Cuddalore for a long time. Had the tsunami struck next year, could they have lost fewer lives?

The answer to that lies in the district's Samiyarpettai village, among its most hazard-prone and vulnerable, that lost 22 lives against 102 in Pudukuppam, thanks to the training they received under the UNDP-funded District Disaster Management and Mitigation Project a few months ago.

Almost all other worst-affected Cuddalore villagers were to be covered under the programme next year.

Cuddalore is one of the seven districts in Tamil Nadu selected for the exercise. District Collector Gagandeep Singh Bedi had identified Samiyarpettai as a model village for the project as it was multi-hazard prone, vulnerable to floods, droughts and earthquakes.

Initially, the Tamil Nadu Fire Force trained Samiyarpettai villagers in all aspects of emergency survival and management. Then trainers from the Anna Institute of Management stepped in to hone their survival skills.

The villagers were organised into permanent teams, each specialising in one aspect of survival including rescue, logistics, teams tending to the elderly, teams that would coordinate with police fire and emergency services etc.

Mock drills were conducted and among those that might have proved the most useful on Sunday were ones that taught villagers about higher safe spots in case of a flood and how to prevent drowning using empty barrels, banana stems. So when the tsunami struck, villagers knew how to respond. "Many more of us would have been killed had we not done what we were trained for," says Chandiran, one of the survivors.

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