



TSUNAMI IMPACT-SRI LANKA: Pledges and More Pledges, But Where Are the Houses?

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HABARADUWA, Sri Lanka, May 25 (IPS) - In his 68 years, V T Piyasena has never lived through anything like the last five months. He lost a daughter and his son-in-law in the Dec. 26 tsunami, and was left with a partially damaged house.

"It has been absolute hell, I never want to go through it again," he told IPS standing inside his half-brick house, half-tent home near Habaraduwa in southern Sri Lanka.

Last week international donors pledged an unprecedented 3 billion U.S. dollars in tsunami reconstruction aid to Sri Lanka during the Sri Lanka Development Forum held in the central city of Kandy. The pledge, at the latest conversion rate would be 300 billion rupees. But it did not make any difference to Piyasena.

"No one knows what we have suffered in the last five months, look around, we are living in a tent, it is terribly hot, we still collect water from bowsers and there is no news where or when we will get new houses," Piyasena's wife Nanda Gamage said.

Like many other tsunami victims, Piyasena and his family believe they would only benefit from aid once permanent houses are built.

Part of the frustration is due to the slow reconstruction effort, which followed the massive emergency relief, soon after the tsunami hit.

On Dec. 26, the world's strongest earthquake in 40 years shook the region, with its epicentre under the sea in the northernmost tip of the Indonesian archipelago. The resulting tsunamis wreaked havoc around the Bay of Bengal, from Sri Lanka, India and the low-lying Maldives in the west, to Thailand and Malaysia in the east. Across Asia, about 290,000 people are either dead or missing after the tsunamis.

In Sri Lanka, the Asian tsunami killed over 30,000 and left a million people internally displaced.

Soon after the tsunami's destructive waves lashed the South-east Asian island, hundreds of local and foreign aid groups and volunteers poured into the disaster areas. But their efforts have not been matched by the reconstruction programme spearheaded by the government.

A day before the donor conference, the Sri Lankan government said that out of an estimated total of 77,561 houses only 119 had been completed by May 15.

"The government officials are yet to even identify where we are to relocate. There is no information. How can we trust that aid will help us? asked H Punyasiri, whose house like Piyasena's is located within the 100 metre buffer zone where new construction is banned.

Government agencies last week said that around 55,000 new homes would have to be built to replace those destroyed within the buffer zone. However the World Bank upped the figure to 70,000.

"The proposed policy (of the buffer zone) would result in over 60 percent of the damaged housing units (about 70,000) in the coastal belt requiring relocation outside the buffer zone," the Bank said in a report titled 'The Economy, the Tsunami and Poverty Reduction'.

It is those who had their houses within the buffer zone who feel the most victimised.

Wilson Gunathileke spends his days sitting in front of his wooden temporary house, near the famous tourist beach at Polhena in Matara, near the southern town of Galle.

"Some of these officials don't know where the beach is, they have no idea about the sea. Anyway by the time they get to us, they have already made the decisions," he told IPS. "For the last four months I have lived either in a tent or a wooden shack and there is no sign of that changing."

If change does not take place fast enough, some of the donors warned at the meeting, which ended on May 17, that problems will aggravate even further.

"Rising poverty and unemployment, worsened by the tsunami and slow development in conflict-affected areas, threaten Sri Lanka's social sector gains," said the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in a report released at last week's review of aid to the island.

The report notes the tsunami-magnified development challenges -- persistent slow growth, rising unemployment and malnutrition in rural areas and the conflict districts in the north and east.

"The tsunami disaster has increased the vulnerability of a large proportion of the very people whose income was to be uplifted under the government's poverty reduction programme," the report said.

More than a quarter of the affected population is estimated to be living below the poverty line of 1,423 rupees (14 U.S. dollars) per month. The total loss of jobs due to the tsunami is approximately 200,000.

Economic growth forecasts have been cut by one percentage point to 5.0 for 2005. The Central Bank says the country needs six to eight percent growth to tackle poverty and unemployment. Last year growth was a 5.4 percent. (END/2005)

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