

PRESS RELEASE

United Nations Development Programme



Tsunami survivors work to clear coastal debris in Sri Lanka

22 April 2005: Using bare hands, shovels and barrows, tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka are cleaning the debris-strewn coast and getting paid for it under a United Nations Development Programme project funded by the Japanese government.

Some 5,500 people affected by last December's wave surge have participated in the cash-for-work project administered through UNDP, with more expected to participate in coming weeks.

The workers, young and old, are paid Rs. 300 (about US \$3) a day to sort through piles of rubble which have hindered the return to normalcy in these areas. The cash-for-work effort, costing a little under half a million dollars is providing much needed temporary employment and has speeded up the tedious task of sprucing up neighbourhoods in the north, east and the south, before the construction of permanent housing can begin.

"Apart from clearing up the coastal belt, the program injects much-needed cash into local economies," said Nynke Kuperus, Transition and Recovery analyst at the UNDP.

"It contributes to and supports families in their struggle to overcome the disaster," she said. Women, in particular, feel self-confident when they participate."

Much of the work is done manually or with rudimentary implements like hammers, hoes and axes. Tractors are sent periodically to haul away heavier material.

"It is difficult for individuals to do this sort of work alone," said Gnana Sivapathasundaram, the UNDP's senior programme officer in Jaffna. "Many of these people have been traumatized by the tsunami disaster and cannot be expected to clear up even their own compounds on their own."

In Marudamunai, Ampara, 38-year-old barber, Koneswaran, was able to clear his property with the help of two other cash-for-workers. "This is a great opportunity for us to get this work done. Now I have to collect some money to rebuild my home."

Project supervisors worked to get the scheme underway before the imminent monsoon rains turned the rubbish mounds into potential breeding grounds for disease. Much of the debris is can be recycled to build new houses and repair roads and irrigation channels while other waste is used to bolster retaining bunds, or embankments, along the sea shore.

Of the 261,414 Sri Lankan families affected in the disaster, over half live in the northern and eastern provinces where UNDP is supporting the ongoing peace process through its Transition Programme. Several cash-for-work projects began in March, after major emergency operations, such as clearing main roads, had been completed by the government.

At least 13 areas in the districts of Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, Hambantota and Galle have cash-for-work programmes in progress while more will kick off in coming weeks. The programmes are supported by Japan, one of several key donors who responded to the UNDP's call for emergency aid to restore housing, small-scale infrastructure and livelihoods and for other urgent needs in the wake of the disaster which claimed the lives of 31,229 Sri Lankans.