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# HOPE IN TSUNAMI RE-BUILDING

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The past year has been one of mixed emotions for the tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka. The initial trauma and shock gave way to hope of a proper rehabilitation, which receded with each bout of political bickering and ended in dejection. However, at the end of the year, it is that unique Sri Lankan attribute to get on with life rather than wallow in distress that has stood out and made all the difference.

According to official estimates, 35,322 people died, 21,441 were injured, 1,500 children were orphaned and nearly a million persons were displaced when giant tidal waves struck two-thirds of the island's coastline. Fifty-two district secretariat divisions (equivalents of taluks in India) in 13 districts across the country's northern, eastern, southern and south-western coasts were affected.

However, different government agencies have put out different figures on the exact number of the dead. While the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) puts the number of dead at 35,322, the police estimate is 20,936, of whom 10,152 were buried in mass graves and 421 were missing. Adding another twist to the tangled figures is a recent report by the Registrar General, which states that just over 17,000 tsunami-related death certificates were issued.

It has also been a year of remarkable positives. Among them is the fact that the handling of the post-tsunami operations helped avoid additional deaths from pestilence. Part of the credit for this should go to the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), whose number has grown several-fold, and the inherent advantage of the island-nation's positive social indicators, which have created a broad platform from which the rebuilding effort can take off.

The Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Relief (OCHA), led by the former United States President, Bill Clinton, noted that "thanks to a quick combined response by the government, local authorities, local NGOs, private sector and the international community, the country recorded no additional deaths because of tsunami-related diseases or lack of delayed medical treatment".

While relief distribution, despite lacunae, has thrown up no major issues, the real challenge lies in the housing sector. Construction is set to grow at a high rate in the coming years,

provided the nation overcomes problems relating to labour and raw materials. "The cost of labour has risen sharply," said Piyal Ekanayake, a contractor from central Sri Lanka, working in the south-western coast. "Before the tsunami, I had to pay Rs.250 a day for a semi-skilled worker. Now it is difficult to get anyone for Rs.350 plus food," he says, overseeing the finishing touches to a housing project.

Promoters of housing units in the east have a more difficult time, confronted with a "massive shortage" of skilled labour, particularly masons. "I cannot get skilled labour, particularly masons, even if I pay more than Rs.800 a day. The best are going at Rs.1,000," said Jude Manoharan Joseph, director of a housing reconstruction project in Batticaloa district. Nearly 98,000 houses were damaged in the tsunami. The implementation of transitional housing projects is under way, as is the construction of the first permanent housing units. Of the targeted 60,000 transitional shelters, 54,102 have been completed and 1,948 are nearing completion. This would allow people to move out of the tents they are living in, the OCHA said.

"Now there is some hope," Saman Wickreme de Silva, a beneficiary of a housing scheme in southern Sri Lanka, told *Frontline* in early December. His hamlet near Peraliya, where a train full of passengers was washed away, had reason to celebrate a year after the tsunami. The new government is what brings De Silva hope, for the housing scheme is promoted by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a partner in the ruling alliance. He and his neighbours believe that the new government will set right the "lack of planning and absence of political coordination".

Gowthaman Balachandran, country representative, OXFAM-Australia, one of several international NGOs that have taken up reconstruction projects, foresees severe material shortages in the coming year. While there appear to be no problems in the availability of cement, shortages are imminent in roofing material, timber and sand. "These will come to a head next year," he said.

Balachandran does not subscribe to the view that not much has been done in the reconstruction phase. "Housing is a long-term investment," he said and added that Sri Lanka had managed it better than other tsunami-hit countries.

Joseph says that importing skilled labour is a way out, but political sensitivities are a concern. "In the short term, political sentiments may say that local jobs are lost. However, the inflow of tsunami funds and their full utilisation will prove that there are benefits to be gained by the multiplier effect in terms of additional jobs created, higher standards of living and opening up of new employment opportunities. By blocking off this one element, the entire tsunami aid absorption capacity is stunted." Officials in TAFREN say the Labour Ministry and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have addressed the problem of shortage of skilled labour by conducting a training programme.

For the victims, however, these are the government's problems. "There have been shortcomings in the past, the new government will have to overcome them," JVP leader Somawanse Amarasinghe told *Frontline*.

Sayani Kusumalatha, who lost her father and an eight-year-old son, has moved into her new house with her husband and two surviving children. Her face radiates happiness and her main priority now is to re-create the family's lost home.

In the east, it is a case of double victimisation. "We are caught between several cross-fires," a Tamil resident at a relief camp in the eastern Amparai district said requesting anonymity. He was referring to the conflict within the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its impact on their battle for survival.

On a visit to the camp on a rainy day in early December, this correspondent found the people huddled under a makeshift roof. Their main problem is simple but tragic. They do not know how much more the tension between the LTTE and the group led by its former military commander, V. Muralitharan ('Col.' Karuna), would disrupt their lives.

However, according to people working in the eastern districts, the issue of reconstruction appears to have been kept out of the internecine fighting. According to an informed source, the two groups "have left us alone" but they are keen that "quality is maintained" and have a monitoring system in place.

While the homeless aspire for dwelling units, the plight of those who have lost their livelihoods is even more telling. According to official statistics, over 1.5 lakh people lost their livelihoods, spread across sectors such as tourism, fishing and agriculture. The fisheries sector accounted for more than 50 per cent of this number. Available figures indicate that about 70 per cent have regained their main source of income.

Shanta Samaraweera, a fisherman in southern Sri

Lanka, stands outside a wooden shack where his brick-and-mortar house once stood. The shack was donated by the local "temple authorities". He is back on the seas "thanks to a boat given by an American NGO". What then about the role of the government? "They give us food rations, but it has to be edible. At such a cost, what a waste of money!" he says. But he wants to move on in life and, like most of his fellow-countrymen, hopes to make good his losses one day. ■

### Some of the major human and social impacts of the tsunami

#### HUMAN

No. of people killed	35,322
No. of people injured	21,441
No. of internally displaced people (IDP)	516,150

#### ECONOMIC

Value of lost assets	\$900m
No. of lost livelihoods	150,000
No. of houses damaged	98,000
Proportion of fishing fleet destroyed	75%
Extent of salinated agricultural land acres	23,449
Damage to tourism infrastructure:	
Large hotels	53 out of 242
Small hotels	248
Related small enterprises	210

#### SOCIAL

Widowed, orphaned and affected	
Elderly and disabled	40,000
Health facilities damaged	97
Education facilities damaged:	
Schools	182
Universities	4
Vocational training centres	15
Schools used as camps for IDPs	446
Schoolchildren affected	200,000

Source: TAFREN, Central Bank, Mof, National Planning Department Sectoral Reports