

COMMUNITY RELIEF EFFORT IN SRI LANKA USES TSUNAMI DISASTER TO BUILD
A NEW LIFE FOR VICTIMS OF DISCRIMINATION

AdvocacyNet

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Washington, DC: Less than a month since the tsunami wave struck Sri Lanka, the Home for Human for Human Rights (HHR) has begun to work on rehabilitation projects with survivors and strengthen its own capacity to keep international partners informed of progress. The survivors have already requested a sewing center for about 30 Tamil girls who were unemployed before their houses were destroyed.

HHR, a partner of AP and one of Sri Lanka's most respected human rights groups, is helping 171 Tamil families in the badly-affected coastal town of Batticaloa. The families have been doubly displaced – first, by communal violence several years ago and more recently by the tsunami.

HHR officials hope that their efforts, while tiny compared to the global response, can serve as a model for community-based programs that target underprivileged groups and build local capacity long after international interest in the tsunami has waned.

This will require continued interest and generosity from within Sri Lanka as well as abroad. HHR staff have given \$500 from their own salaries. Sugi Selvaratnam, the daughter of HHR's director, and her husband Sextus, have raised over \$10,000 from friends and neighbors in Santa Cruz where they live, and helped to place several articles in the California press. In Washington DC, AP's online appeal for HHR has raised over \$2,500 in two weeks. Of this, \$1,579 was raised from Georgetown students by a team of volunteers under the direction of Michael Keller, a 22 year-old Georgetown student who worked with HHR as an AP intern last summer.

At present, the focus in Batticaloa is still very much on the emergency. Most of the tsunami refugees are being housed in a shelter and many are still traumatized by their ordeal. During one visit, Francis Xavier, the director of the HHR, found one woman who had lost nine members of her family and was digging in the sand in an effort to find their bodies. "This gives you an idea of the mental state of many of these people," he writes in his third dispatch. (HHR dispatches can be read on the AP website).

HHR officials in Batticaloa have provided emergency aid in the form of fresh water, clothing, food, and school materials for the children, who were due to start school on January 20. But the challenge of rebuilding has already begun. Some refugees have insisted on returning to homes that are intact but knee-high in unhygienic water (which locals describe as "poisonous"). HHR officials have been working with the local authorities to dig canals and drain the water, and also provided logistical support for a visiting team of epidemiologists from the US-based Circle of Health International. At some stage they will discuss the purchase of land and even building houses.

This work is being coordinated with the survivors, who have proved to be remarkably resilient, in spite of their trauma. The 171 families lived in three departments (“wards”) in Batticaloa, and at an early meeting with HHR officials they elected a committee of 9 to coordinate their response. One of their first requests was to establish a sewing center where women under the age of 25 would be taught sewing. Others are interested in raising poultry, and picking up their previous lives as cobblers. In response, HHR is seeking to rent a room in a local school and hire a sewing teacher. It will also purchase sewing machines and shoe-mending equipment.

The challenge facing HHR itself is to manage all of this in such a way as to strengthen its own capacity as a human rights organization. HHR has moved staff to Batticaloa, and plans to hire a lawyer who speaks English, Tamil and Sinhala who can provide legal aid.

But HHR will also have to disseminate regular information if it is to sustain interest in rehabilitation. HHR has purchased a digital camera and installed two computers in the Batticaloa office and AP is seeking an IT expert (eRider) who can train HHR staff on the equipment and even help them post their own blogs to the Internet. AP will also continue to post HHR’s dispatches and photos on the AP web site.

Meanwhile, in Washington, several voluntary associations at Georgetown University are joining forces to study and support long-term reconstruction. AP’s Michael Keller hopes to put HHR’s work on their agenda, and continue to tap into the interest and sympathy shown by his fellow students.

- Read [Michael Keller's 2004 reports from Sri Lanka](#)