
AdvocacyNet

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AP'S PARTNER IN SRI LANKA LAUNCHES APPEAL FOR TSUNAMI VICTIMS

- Discrimination and Poverty Worsen the Impact of the Disaster

Washington, D.C., January 6, 2004: The Advocacy Project is supporting an emergency appeal by its partner in Sri Lanka, the Home for Human Rights (HHR), on behalf of 171 Tamil families who lost their homes in the Tsunami disaster and are facing total destitution.

The families are among 4,000 displaced persons living in a refugee shelter in the Sri Lankan town of Batticaloa on the east coast. Over 3,000 residents of the town were drowned when the wave struck on December 26, and another 1,000 are still missing.

The 171 families were visited this week by the Director of HHR, Francis Xavier, who told the Advocacy Project by phone that they are in "desperate" condition, despite the presence of several aid agencies. The families only have food for one meal a day, which is insufficient for nursing mothers, and are still wearing the clothes they wore when the wave struck. The children need food, clothes and mosquito nets.

HHR itself has not been affected by the disaster, although one of the group's 42 staff members had a narrow escape when she was forced to climb onto the roof of her house in Alvai to escape the Tsunami. HHR staff have so far raised \$1,000 for the Batticaloa families, and are contributing 10% of their salaries. HHR has opened a special bank account for the appeal.

HHR is one of Sri Lanka's foremost human rights monitoring groups, and Mr. Xavier said that it would not be diverted from its core human rights mission by the relief work. However, he said, the immediate needs are so overwhelming that all of Sri Lankan civil society has mobilized on behalf of Tsunami victims.

Community-based NGOs like HHR, which has a staff of 14 and an office in Batticaloa, are particularly well suited to make sure that emergency aid reaches those most in need, and also that long-term reconstruction focuses on rebuilding local capacity. In addition, many of the families need legal aid because they have lost their identity cards and school certificates. This sort of work is particularly appropriate for human rights groups.

HHR's human rights mission could also help it play a role in the relief effort in the East. HHR has managed to steer a middle course between the Government forces and the Tamil Tigers while at the same time aggressively monitoring abuses during Sri Lanka's 22-year civil war. This could provide HHR with access to disputed areas like Batticaloa, where neither side has won outright control.

Furthermore, there is a strong human rights dimension to the Tsunami disaster, in that many of the victims were forced to move to low-lying coastal ground by poverty and discrimination. The 171 families are among hundreds of Tamils who fled from the town of Navalkudah five years ago following Muslim-Tamil riots, and set up makeshift homes near the sea in Batticaloa. Before the wave struck, they earned a living from manual work such as sewing, repairing shoes, and washing clothes.

The impact of HHR's appeal will rely heavily on advocacy and networking. But the group's ability to disseminate information is limited by its lack of a web site. As a result, AP is creating a new web page on the AP site for HHR's reports, photos and any other material related to the Batticaloa appeal. These will be posted as they arrive. Any donations to AP over the next two months will also be transferred immediately to HHR.

AP will be helped by Michael Keller, who worked as an intern for HHR last summer. AP will be sending another intern to Sri Lanka in the summer of 2005, to help design a web site and set up a system of information management.

* Donations to the HHR appeal can be sent to the Commercial Bank, Kollupitiya Branch, Sri Lanka. Savings A/C # 8111401801 "Home for Human Rights". Routing # 034194 or CCEYLK LX.

* Donations can be made through the Advocacy Project by visiting the AP home page and clicking on the Paypal button, top left.

*To read Michael Keller's 2004 reports from Sri Lanka visit:
<http://www.advocacy.net/author/michael-keller/>

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