

DISCRIMINATION, DISPLACEMENT AND DETERMINATION MARK SRI LANKA'S TSUNAMI RELIEF EFFORT

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Colombo, Sri Lanka: Tamil Communities on Sri Lanka's east coast are facing discrimination as they seek to claim their rightful share of Tsunami relief aid, according to the Home for Human Rights (HHR), a leading Sri Lankan human rights organization and partner of the Advocacy Project (AP).

During a recent visit to the region, HHR's Director Francis Xavier heard from hundreds of Tsunami survivors who have been denied aid because they were from a lower caste or were viewed as outsiders. But Xavier was also encouraged that many survivors had petitioned HHR for help and are lobbying for their rights. "I am impressed by their determination to fight back and get on with their lives," he said.

HHR has supported two Tsunami-affected communities from its own emergency fund and is now implementing a reconstruction program with help from the Dutch Refugee Foundation (Stichting Vluchteling). A series of blogs on Xavier's trip to the East are being posted on the AP website by AP Director Iain Guest, who accompanied Xavier.

The blogs paint a portrait of Sri Lankan civil society seeking to assert itself in the middle of a huge and complex relief operation. But they also raise basic questions about the impact of emergency aid on a damaged society, and whether relief agencies should seek to restore the status quo. Given how vulnerable the Tamils were to prejudice and poverty before the Tsunami, some might argue for helping them to make a fresh start.

The Tsunami struck Sri Lanka with devastating force on December 26, 2004, killing over 31,000 people and destroying an estimated 65,000 houses. Over 3,000 died along the coast of Batticaloa province, which is largely populated by Tamils.

Many were vulnerable to the Tsunami because they had been displaced by ethnic tension and forced to move to low-lying land. One group of families, which earns a living from washing clothes, settled next to the sea after the police took their land in Poonichimunai. 14 drowned in the Tsunami. They were then denied dry food rations in the refugee shelter - apparently because they came from a lower caste.

Others have faced discrimination after returning to their villages. Sri Lanka has received over \$3 billion dollars of government aid and the government has pledged to rebuild all of the houses destroyed and give each affected family 5,000 rupees (\$50) a month.

But 65 families in the village of Manalchenai, who were originally expelled from the tea estates in central Sri Lanka 1977, have been refused aid by local government officials and by village leaders who are apparently trying to force them to move again.

International NGOs have raised over \$800 million for Sri Lanka and are working extensively in communities, but HHR found that some NGO assistance has widened the gap between rich and poor. 19 of the 32 fishing boats in Cheddipalayam were disabled by the Tsunami, but NGOs only replaced six boats that belonged to the rich owners.

Other needy cases have simply slipped through the cracks. Xavier met one survivor in the village of Periyaneelavanai who lost five children but is still unable to find help, although 65 NGOs are offering psychosocial assistance in the region, according to the chief psychiatrist at Batticaloa hospital.

In an interview with AP, Xavier applauded the dedication of aid agencies but suggested that they should take more time to adapt their support to the needs of survivors and think through the impact of aid on complex social relations.

HHR's field officers have conducted an extensive assessment over the past few weeks, with help from Sarosh Syed, an AP intern, and identified projects in six communities. AP and HHR will be posting regular reports on both websites over the next year.

- Read [Sarosh Syed's blog](#).