

India's tsunami victims abandoned

T. Kala, Ram Kumar
30 December 2005

One year after the tsunami devastated southern Asia, millions of people in the southern and eastern coastal areas of India are yet to return to their normal lives. Contrary to the big promises made by the national and Tamil Nadu state governments, relief and rehabilitation measures largely remain in the distant future.

The tsunami killed more than 11,000 people in India and another 2.7 million people were affected. The majority of victims were from fishing communities, while 15 percent came from farming families and 5 percent worked in small businesses.

The devastated areas included 12 districts of Tamil Nadu, villages in Pondicherry and Andhra Pradesh and parts of the west coast of Kerala. In Andaman and Nicobar islands in the Bay of Bengal, where about 3,500 people were killed, about 46,000 residents are still living in temporary shelters.

Throughout India over 150,000 houses were fully or partially destroyed. The government claims that 46,000 have been replaced with "disaster resistant houses" and promises to build another 40,000 houses for people whose houses were not damaged but who were living within 200 metres of the high tide line.

These figures, however, are difficult to believe as soon as one visits some of the affected areas. Although non-government organisations (NGOs) have begun constructing 32,207 houses only 1,564 have been completed.

Long-term reconstruction projects—a 1.66 billion rupee World Bank funded project and a 5.61 billion rupee Asian Development Bank project—have been cleared by the Tamil Nadu state government. However it will take two years to complete them, according to authorities.

In the worst-affected district of Nagapattinam on the eastern coast, only 600 of the 17,460 destroyed houses have so far been restored and handed over. Nagapattinam District Collector Dr Radhakrishnan said it would take another six months for all the affected people to get their own houses.

Nationally, it was estimated that \$US1.2 billion (54 billion rupees) was needed for rehabilitation and reconstruction. There has been no clear official statement on how much has been allocated so far. According to the central government's finance minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu state has been given 23.47 billion rupees. But Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram claims that only 6.79 billion rupees have been released by New Delhi.

The record of the Tamil Nadu government has been no different. The state relief commissioner R. Santhanam recently admitted that while the state government had issued orders for the release of 11.36 billion rupees, only about 8.76 billion rupees had been released and just 6.30 billion rupees spent.

The conditions faced by people staying in temporary shelters built by two international NGOs—World Vision and TVS—in Kannakinagar in the Kancheevaram district of Tamil Nadu reveal the official lack of concern for the fate of victims. Residents from the tsunami-hit villages of Srinivasanagar, Thideernagar, Odaikuppam, Thiruvannamiyur, Beasantnagar and Kuppam were relocated there last February.

Last week WWSW reporters visited Kannakinagar. A former local NGO field worker Donovan Gerera Moses explained: "In April there were floods here. Even though the authorities knew the flood-prone condition of this land, they selected it for the NGOs to construct temporary shelters for the tsunami-affected people.

"In October the government gave 1,000 rupees to each family and asked them to go to their neighbours' places or boarding house quarters. Even if families managed with this in October, what were they to do for the next month? One of their major problems is travelling to work. They have no permanent jobs. If they go to Mylapore it will take 20 rupees per day; if it is Parry's Corner they have to spend 30 rupees per day."

According to Moses, only 10 percent of the settlers are fishermen. The others are mainly wage labourers, such as rickshaw pullers, construction workers and domestic servants. They receive very low incomes.

He said their future was uncertain: "The government has not yet confirmed where the people are going to stay and where the permanent structures are going to be. The slum clearance board is constructing houses at Chemmencheri, a few kilometres from here, but no one knows whether the houses are going to be allocated to these people. They don't know where to go."

He pointed out that wrangling between various district administrations had created further delays. "These people were residents of Chennai [Madras] district but they were relocated in Kannakinagar, which is in Kancheevaram district. So there is a delay in deciding which district administration will resolve their shelter problems."

The children at the Kannakinagar temporary shelters are confronted with great difficulties. Children aged from 1 to 5 depend on assistance from NGOs, which provide snacks. "Children aged over 6 are going to their old schools. They have to travel at least one hour. Because nearly ten thousand families are in this locality, the buses are so crowded that students have to stand all the way to school. Due to the poor condition of the road, the bus stops at the main road and the students have to walk one kilometre. They become very tired returning from the school." Moses said.

"Now 1,300 families have been left without temporary shelters

because of torrential rain and floods. Sanitary conditions are poor. Many people are affected by diarrhea, vomiting and fever. Though there is a health centre maintained by the NGO, the doctor is only available at particular times during daytime. People can't afford to consult private doctors."

World Vision and TVS have built 15 toilets for temporary settlers but 600 families have to share them.

Maheswari Marimuthu, a mother of two daughters, aged 16 and 17, and a son, 20, described her situation. Her husband is a rickshaw cycle operator. The younger daughter is studying sixth standard. The elder daughter has been mentally disturbed since birth and has had to live at a neighbour's place since the tsunami.

"How can I keep her with me in this situation? My son has no permanent job. As a rickshaw operator my husband has to stay in our old place to cater for his customers. He visits here once a week. He earns only 50 rupees per day. Now if I search for any job the employer will ask my residential address. When I am living on the roadside and sleeping in the corporation school, how can I give the address?" she asked.

"Because of the burden of paying travelling expenses, 20 rupees out of his daily earnings of 50 rupees, at one point my husband said it was better for him to live separately."

She condemned the inadequacy of the government's aid. "We got an initial payment of 4,000 rupees. Then they give us 1,000 rupees per month for three months. But some people didn't get even that.

"It is the responsibility of the government and the NGOs to resolve our problem. We elect the government. We are citizens of this state. They should take care of us. The civil administrative officer in Thasildar said we could go there regularly to collect food. But that means travelling 8 kilometres daily. Before the tsunami we lived in freedom. Now we are forced to live here in pathetic conditions."

Sridar Padavettan, 38, a photographer, a father of two, said: "My wife is working as a teacher for the child care centre run by the local NGO Uthavi. She is paid 1,000 rupees per month for preparing snacks for the children and caring for them during the day.

"In order to get my son and daughter admitted to a kindergarten, I had to pay 6,000 rupees as a donation to the private school that owns it. This is a concession for me because we are tsunami-affected. Otherwise, we would have to pay 10,000 rupees."

The tsunami-affected people of Kasimedu in North Madras were relocated in the Kargil Vetri Nagar temporary shelters, built by an NGO in the Ennore area. The government authorities ignored complaints that the area was flood-prone. With complete disregard for safety, the shelters were built with flammable tar-coated roofs. A fire destroyed more than a thousand shelters on June 21 and a 26-year-old man died as a result.

The Chennai district collector, Chandra Mohan, admitted that the Chennai Municipal Corporation chose tar-coated light-roof sheets because they were "cost effective".

Because of fires on June 15 and 21, and the floods caused by recent torrential rains, in October the residents were shifted to

another set of temporary shelters built by local NGOs—Karunalaya and the Peoples Action Movement (PAM)—in Ernavur in the Thiruvallur district. Each house is tiny—about 3 x 4.5 metres. Continuous rain brought suffering because the tiled roofs were leaking.

Parvathy Nagappan told the WSWs that her mother Meganayaki Thanapal, 50, had died because of the water-logged conditions in October: "Nobody expected her death. She helped us cooking on that day. Suddenly she got a fever and experienced breathing problems. When we took her to the government hospital, she passed away. A doctor confirmed that she died because of Janni (high fever). She had been standing in water for a long time the previous day."

Ananthi Kuppen, 20, a volunteer, told the WSWs: "I have studied up to eighth standard. My family was also relocated here after the tsunami. I joined Karunalaya as a helper to look after the school children here. There are about 140 children here. Earlier our organisation provided a van to take them to their schools. Now that facility is no longer available. This has adversely affected their education.

"Some people wanted to send their children to the schools where they studied before the tsunami because of the quality of education and their familiarity with those schools. To do so they had to spend 20 rupees per day. Some parents couldn't afford it and had to stop their children's education."

Subramani Vaidyanathan, 42, was relocated and now works as a private security guard at the shelter complex. He witnessed the death of Muniyakan Thespandi, 55, a fisherman, who fell into flood waters in front of his shelter at about 5 am on December 18. "He suddenly slipped down into the water. When we dragged him out he was dead. There was no doctor or anybody else to give him first aid."

As well as abandoning the tsunami victims, the Indian government has failed to establish an early warning system. For all the hype about India's "achievements" in the field of science, the proposed Early Warning System for Tsunami and Storm Surges in the Indian Ocean, to be built at the total cost of 1.25 billion rupees, is only scheduled to be operational by September 2007.

Likewise, the Disaster Management Bill 2005, which is supposed to institutionalise disaster management in India at the central, state and district levels, was only passed on December 12. In the wake of the tsunami, the government claimed that it would be enacted immediately.

The indifference of all levels of government to the plight of the tsunami victims is a graphic example of the official response to other so-called natural calamities and more generally to the social disaster created by the profit system that condemns tens of millions of people to abject poverty.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact