

Tsunami survivors left to suffer on Andaman and Nicobar islands

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4 January 2006

Just over a year ago, the December 26 tsunami devastated the Andaman and Nicobar islands, a low-lying and mostly uninhabited chain of 572 islands in the Bay of Bengal. Officially, more than 3,000 people were confirmed dead and another 5,000 missing on the archipelago, which was the closest Indian territory to the earthquake's epicentre. Aid agencies and local groups, however, believe that twice as many people died.

Today, despite the Indian government's much-touted "rescue and restoration effort," 10,000 survivors from the 38 inhabited islands are still living in temporary shelters. Rashid Yusuf of the Nicobarese Tribal Association told the BBC that tin-and-metal "intermediate shelters" had been erected all over the islands as supposed protection from the heavy monsoon rains.

Victims have complained to the media that the tin lodgings are like blast furnaces in the hot and sultry climate, showing the authorities' ignorance of local needs and lack of any careful planning. Because the shelters have no floors, they become muddy during the frequent rains, risking the residents' health and hygiene.

"If the government had given us the tools and the timber, we would have constructed our own traditional eco-friendly houses that are comfortable in the hot and humid local conditions," Yusuf said, adding that the tin sheds could not survive heavy rain or cyclones. He insisted that the administration give up its plans to use the pre-fabricated structures as permanent houses.

Initially, the government refused foreign aid for the islands and prohibited access by international agencies to assist the desperate victims. Its primary concern was to preserve the secrecy surrounding the Indian military facilities in the territory.

Since then, many instances have been reported of misplaced relief priorities from the Indian government and various NGOs. Much of the more than one billion rupees (\$US21.8 million) allocated for relief and rehabilitation in the archipelago has been wasted on useless supplies.

The administration allocated 1,000 metres of nylon rope to each of the 10,000 families most affected by the disaster, but the rope was of no use to them. Jeeps and motorcycles supplied for the relief efforts were likewise ineffective because there were no fuelling stations. Thousands of bicycles were not used due to the lack of any built roads. Instead, people needed boats and canoes, which were not delivered in sufficient numbers.

Fishermen at Wandoor, a fishing village and tourist resort about 40km from the capital Port Blair, said they had no vessels to return to sea. A selected few had received 10,000 rupees (\$218) to purchase new boats, although boats were estimated to cost as much as 10 times that much.

Reportedly, much of the federal aid has been spent on controversial projects such as the construction of thousands of mud sea walls. These walls are supposed to protect residents from rough seas. Yet, much of the islands' land mass has been swept away and some parts are subject to continuous sinking.

Madhusree Mukherjee, a resident of the Andamans, told the BBC: "The administration in the archipelago is top-down. And rehabilitation is where there's always so much money to be made by those who can." According to a spokesman for the Society for Andaman-Nicobar Ecology (Sane): "Much of the relief money found its way back to big contractors and suppliers in the mainland who made huge profits."

Despite repeated government promises of millions to compensate tsunami victims, the residents say they

have received outrageously paltry amounts for their affected homes and livestock, ranging from 100 to 200 rupees. Following protests by islanders an inquiry was launched into payments as low as 2 rupees (less than 5 US cents).

A woman who received a compensation cheque for 2 rupees told the media: “I lost 300 coconut and areca nut trees in the tsunami, with the damage running up to 20,000 rupees (\$457). Two rupees won’t even pay for a broken window pane.”

Another victim complained: “I lost 300 coconut trees but the government’s damage assessment report says I lost five. Even if I accepted the government’s decision to compensate me for only five trees, I should be getting a few thousand rupees.”

In one instance, 24 villagers from Chouldhari, one of the most severely affected areas in the central Andamans, received 118 rupees (\$2.74) each for their six acres of farm land even though official estimates of the value of the damaged lands range from a quarter to half a million rupees.

Concerned by the inadequate relief supplies sent to the more recent earthquake victims in Kashmir, the islands’ survivors reportedly volunteered to send material, even while still living in temporary shelter themselves.

The administration’s contempt and indifference to the plight of the tsunami homeless has been highlighted by the rapid reconstruction of the military installations on the archipelago. While thousands of refugees are living in substandard housing, the islands’ badly damaged naval bases were refurbished within four months, complete with a new radar system.

The strategically-located bases are crucial to India’s ambitions to be a naval power in the Malacca Strait and beyond, and calculated to counter China’s presence in Burma’s Coco Islands, just 50 km to the north of the archipelago. In 2001, India spent an estimated \$2 billion to establish the Andaman Nicobar Command, jointly run by the army, navy, air force and the coast guard, to preside over its regional military operations.

Last April, officials celebrated the complete restoration of the Car Nicobar naval and air force base. Defence spokesperson Commander Salil Mehta confirmed that the base, known as the Far Eastern Andaman and Nicobar Command, was fully operational, with strike aircraft carrying out exercises

from the Port Blair airfield.

“We have received AL-32s and other transport aircraft along with strike aircraft from their respective squadrons in mainland India. During the exercise, we also conducted in-flight refuelling with IL-78 tanker aircraft. This marks the restoration of long haul operations at the Car Nicobar base,” he proudly told the press. Since then the base has reportedly coordinated a number of joint naval and air operations.



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