

Two years after the Asian tsunami: thousands still suffering in India

Ram Kumar, T. Kala
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On the second anniversary of the December 2004 Asian tsunami, many survivors in Indian coastal villages and the Andaman and Nicobar islands still face atrocious conditions, including lack of proper housing, sanitary conditions and livelihoods. The disaster killed around 14,000 people in India and another 2.7 million people were affected. Most of the victims were from fishing communities.

In the southern state of Tamil Nadu alone, where 8,005 people were killed, 3,551 injured and 487,185 evacuated, tens of thousands are still without permanent houses. Many are living in shelters built by non-government organisations. On the remote Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, where about 3,500 people were killed, more than 9,700 families are still without proper shelter. They live in temporary homes of corrugated iron sheets, under the often-unbearable heat of the tropical sun.

According to United Nations, World Bank and Asian Development Bank reports published this month, across the tsunami-affected areas of India, just 28 percent of the needed 98,477 houses have been built. In the Andaman and Nicobar islands, less than 1 percent of the 9,714 homes required have been completed.

The Congress-led national government and successive state governments in Tamil Nadu have ignored the pressing needs of tsunami survivors. The current Tamil Nadu government has stopped relief aid. In Nagapattinam, one of the worst hit areas of Tamil Nadu, local official Tenkasi Jawahar said 6,000 houses had been completed, leaving around 8,000 families still in temporary shelters. He hoped they would be housed by March.

No lessons have been learnt from the tragedy. According to the latest report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, none of the state or union territory authorities have prepared Coastal Zone Management Plans or passed Disaster Management Acts.

The report stated that 440.9 million rupees (\$US10

million) earmarked for tsunami relief had been siphoned off to cover existing liabilities and administrative expenditure. In other cases, tsunami victims had been “adversely affected” by the non-utilisation of 170.3 million rupees in relief funds. The unused money has simply been returned to the central government.

In Tamil Nadu, sustenance allowances were not distributed to 7,322 families. Some 2,742 temporary shelters, costing 20.6 million rupees, could not be used because they were built in low-lying areas that were waterlogged due to rain.

In Andhra Pradesh, delays in land acquisition and opposition by tsunami victims to being moved away from the coast resulted in the postponed completion of permanent housing. In Kerala, only 2,431 houses had been completed out of 4,053 supposed to be built by non-government organisations.

Shivani Chaudhry of the Housing and Land Rights Network condemned the failure of governments to provide adequate housing and involve victims in decisions. “Forgetting this in the midst of disaster response not only results in abuse and violation of survivors’ human rights but also spells failure for post-tsunami housing projects.”

During his visit this year to the tsunami-ravaged village of Thazhanguda in Cuddalore district, former US president and UN special envoy Bill Clinton tried to paint the international aid effort in the brightest colours. “What is being done here I would like to see copied throughout the world,” he said.

The real conditions in Tamil Nadu present a different picture.

Viji Senthilnathan, 18, living in the Kasimedu area before the tsunami. I don't know how they can allot permanent houses to all of us. When we lived on the seashore we somehow managed day to day. It is very difficult for the aged and sick to survive.

Thonithurai in Nagapattinam, told the WWS: "I married my sister's husband to look after my sister's five-year-old daughter. The government gave her just 50,000 rupees because her mother was killed by the tsunami wave. I now have a boy, six months old.

"There are 800 families here. But we have only 14 toilets—7 for men and 7 for women. Some families have 7 or 8 members. The non-government organisation World Vision is building four houses, but we don't have bathroom facilities so most of us are forced to use these houses as bathrooms.

"Usually the rice sold in the ration shops is not good quality, and 5 kilograms is not enough for us. We have to buy rice for 15 or 17 rupees per kilo on the open market. Likewise, the government sells us 3 litres of kerosene at 9 rupees per litre, and we have to buy the rest for 25 or 30 rupees per litre."

Mathalai Meri, 28, a cook living in the Velankanni camp, said: "I am not well. I am taking medicine for Chick Kun Kuniya fever and I have pain in my joints. I separated from my husband seven years ago and I am living with my two children—my elder son is studying third standard and the younger girl is going to start her first standard in June 2007. My elder sister is also living in this camp.

"This is a tourist centre, and I can earn 20 rupees a day cooking. In the festive season if my master gets more orders, I can earn more. In order to get a permanent house I have to surrender my own destroyed house, which was larger. I am unable to rebuild my own house with my mere income."

Jamruthnisha Thameem, 20, a housewife, said: "Our house, which was near the river, was destroyed when the tsunami hit. My brother lost his son. Out of 56 tsunami-affected families, the government provided aid to 30 only. Because this is a tourist area, we were unable to earn a living for six months. We only managed to survive with the help of the government and the NGOs. My husband is

now running a mobile soup stall.

"First the government authorities told us they would build a new house on our own land, of 1,308 square feet. But now they are offering a house of only 436 square feet. My family consists of six members. How can we adjust to living within this small area? Some families have 13 members."

Hari Krishnan, 28, living in a shelter at Ennoor near Madras, said: "We have 3,000 families here. We were in the Kasimedu area before the tsunami. I don't know how they can allot permanent houses to all of us. When we lived on the seashore we somehow managed day to day. It is very difficult for the aged and sick to survive.

"In the rainy season we suffered a lot when the sewage blocked and entered the house. All the governments of both Madam [former Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalithaa] and Sir [current chief minister Karunanidhi] are the same in ignoring our interests. Some people have been forced to sell one of their kidneys to survive."

In the Andaman and Nicobar islands, Indian territories in the Indian Ocean near Burma and Indonesian Sumatra, the authorities are no more concerned. For example, homes for fishermen are being built on hilltops while farmers have been allotted houses far from their fields. A tsunami survivor, Loknath Pahar from South Andaman, told reporters: "We are farmers. We cannot live away from our farmlands. Why do they ask us when they have already decided everything?"

Last month, dozens of people were injured in clashes with police on one island. Residents were protesting against the design of permanent shelters, which they said did not reflect local concerns. "We hear that on average one million rupees is being spent on each of our houses. Give us half that money, we can build our own houses," a Campbell Bay resident said.

Nicobarese people, most of whom live on the archipelago's southern islands, have traditionally lived in wood and bamboo houses on stilts that can withstand most earthquakes, which are a common occurrence. Their planned homes will be too small—450 square feet—and just 13 feet (four metres) apart, and less able to withstand earthquakes.



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