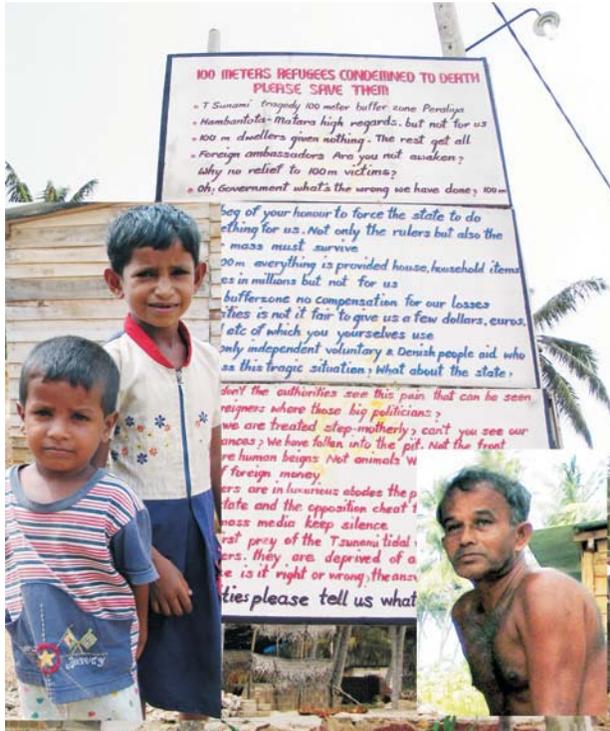


The Sunday Leader

Tsunami victims - not moved by buffer zone



The litany of complaints at Peraliya and Children at the Walahanduwa camp

By **Amantha Perera**

After six months there was a hint of a smile on the faces of V. T. Piyasena and Nanda Gamage of Habaraduwa last week.

For more than 200 days since the December 26 tsunami swept their houses away, the two have been left to live in a half-tent-half-house.

From outside it looks like a tent which has been pitched in front of a high wall. Inside it looks like an overheated igloo trapping heat by the minute. "No problems now, we are building," Piyasena said last week, pointing at the concrete pillars that were going up behind the tent.

Just few yards away the lazy waves were lapping the shore. Piyasena found himself in a terrible predicament after the tsunami. His house was located inside the buffer zone and he could not get any reconstruction commenced due to a government ruling which barred any new constructions inside the zone.

"We have waited long enough, we can't wait any more," his wife Gamage joined in. The house is being reconstructed with the financial support of a foreigner known to a relative.

Are they worried about the buffer zone?

Loop-holes

"Look around, everyone is building, it is either a guesthouse or a tourist spot, but really they are houses," she said alluding to the green light the government gave businesses, which loop-hole is now being used by ordinary civilians to construct houses. Down the southern coast its open building season, on closer inspection.

"If you wait around for governments to help, you will be dead by now," Priyantha Gunsekera said, who is several miles south in Hadiwatte, while repairing his roof.

Gunsekera runs a small kiosk that is also his house right next to the beach, and sees no option but to remain where the waves lashed his family with a small kid and a pregnant wife.

"This is where I do business, I cannot go anywhere else," he told The Sunday Leader. It also lies close to the beach. The buffer zone does not make any difference to him, he says.

The same is true of Unawatuna where the zone is not having any effect on anybody. Constructions which began after the tsunami are complete and newly painted houses dot the famous beach.

As far as the government's buffer zone ruling is concerned, it is still on. "It remains in place to the best of our knowledge, and we eagerly await the results of the Presidential Commission which is studying the problems now. As we have said, we hope the approach will be flexible and humane," World Bank Country Head Peter Harrold told The Sunday Leader.

UN Special Envoy

For several months the government remained unmoved on the buffer zone despite protests by aid workers from the time it was announced. First signs of change came in late May when former US President and UN Special Tsunami Envoy, Bill Clinton visited the devastated Kalmunai.

He returned to Colombo and said the government needed to be more flexible on the buffer zone ruling. The next week, TAFREN Head, Mano Tittawela said the government had appointed a committee to look into it. In the meantime the likes of Piyasena and Gunsekera have run out of patience.

One of the main reasons for the law abiding citizens to thump their nose at the government has been the feeling of being left-out. Decisions are made hundreds of miles away in Colombo and billions pledged thereafter for fancy projects that appear on the drawing board. Sadly most of the refugees have seen very little of the projects being implemented. "Where, show me where the houses are?" R. Ariyasena languishing at the CGR Watta refugee camp in Galle said. "We have enough toilets and bathrooms, if that is good infrastructure, well we are OK. That is because some families have moved out."

Payments overdue

He said that for the seven months since the tsunami, the Rs. 5,000 monthly allowance had been paid twice or thrice. There are more payments outstanding than what the refugees have received. Payments have been delayed due to alleged mishandling of funds at government agent level and allegations of corruption - giving 'favourite' people's names on the recipient lists.

The weekly allowance scheme of Rs. 375 which is made up of rations and money is dangerously close to being wrapped up. It was put in place for six months. Harrold concurred that poor consultation has plagued the reconstruction effort. "In the process of developing the needs assessment, we identified a number of 'guiding principles', which have been adopted by all concerned.

"One of the key principles was that of consultation, in order to keep those who suffered at the centre of focus. This has not always happened, with a tendency towards central planning. For example, house reconstruction in a certain area may have its builder, land allocated, and services being targeted. But no one has spoken to the potential inhabitants about their preferences and their involvement. So this remains an area for improvement and one that we sense is moving - albeit slowly - in the right direction."

The speed at which the change is taking place is not fast enough given the gravity of the problem. World Bank statistics suggest that out of the 87,000 houses partially or completely destroyed, 55,000 are inside the buffer zone. TAFREN obviously felt no need to clear the air on the buffer zone ruling two weeks ago when it went on an advertising binge, running three-page ads in weekend newspapers at over Rs. 100,000 per page. There was no information whether the zone was off or on, but there was detailed information on Tittawela's interviews with the international media. NBC's Ann Currie would be knowing what he thinks, but most of the poor victims living in tents were clueless about the reconstruction work.

Unrealistic

From the start the buffer zone threatened ground reality. In Kalmunai, the nearest available land was the marshes.

In places like Galle authorities have sometimes ventured 12 km inland (see box story) to allocate land for those living along the buffer zone. Even when land was found, there has been resistance from the beneficiaries to relocate. Business people indicated from the beginning that buffer zone or otherwise they were staying put wherever they were.

The fishing community which was hardest-hit has also been rebelling to move out. Of the 110 families which were allocated land and houses outside the zone in Peraliya, about 60 have indicated that they did not want to move out. Just before the Peraliya train tragedy site, a huge cutout has been erected by the victims.

"The first prey of the tsunami tidal wave was the 100 metre dwellers. They are deprived of all the facilities. Is this justice, is it right or wrong, the answer should be live or die. Authorities please tell us what does this mean?"

They might as well pose these questions to Ann Currie - she might know.

Transitional houses at Walahanduwa

Walahanduwa is 12 kms from the nearest tsunami refugee camp located at CGR Watte in Galle. Reaching the new land set aside for the people whose houses were destroyed within the 100 metre buffer zone takes a long time.

Located on a hillock within a government owned rubber plantation, rows of wooden houses appear from the undergrowth suddenly.

Seva Lanka Foundation is setting up 150 transitional houses at Walahanduwa with the intention of turning the site into a new township eventually. "That is the plan," said the official at the site. So far 102 houses

are occupied. "This is the place where we could find government land, and hence the reason to move so far," he added. Life is not easy in these camps. There is only one generator which provides electricity for 26 families for only two and a half hours in the night. The camp expects an additional generator soon.

Bathing and toilet facilities are located in rows just like in the camps with numbers painted on the doors indicating the right to use. Building costs are soaring. A foot of Albysia wood which cost Rs. 2 before the tsunami has gone up in prices to Rs. 26. The same prices would be prevailing when the permanent reconstruction work gets underway. The government says more than 40,000 transitional houses have been completed islandwide, but it estimates that 20 percent do not meet minimum standards.

TAFREN said last week that it expected the construction of 25,000 permanent houses to commence by July 15.

Prema Galappaththi moved to the Walahanduwa camp in late May. "It is much better, while living in the tents we were sickly," she said. She could feel happy with her new home but her husband is not there to share with her. A fisherman by profession, staying at Walahanduwa she said was too cumbersome for him. He remains in Galle town closer to the harbour. "The boat leaves at 2 p.m. and will return at 2 a.m. He could not travel from here, so he stays there," she said. Public transport is not available at odd hours and a three wheeler ride to Galle could cost anything from Rs. 200 upwards.

Her neighbours are faced with a similar situation - the women have occupied the houses. But the children and the men remain scattered all over Galle due to work or studies. Thirty families still live in tents provided by an Italian organisation at CGR Watte in Galle and most of them don't want to go to Walahanduwa. "We will have to find new jobs if we go there," said R. Ariyasena.

Seva Lanka officials said that some families did not accept the houses and they had to return the keys to the District Secretariat. The organisation is building a total of 1,500 temporary houses for the tsunami victims having plans to convert them into permanent houses.

However, land is an issue, the closest available sites are at least 2 km from the coast. Developing areas like Walahanduwa will take a Herculean effort. It would be equal to developing a new town with schools, hospitals and other facilities.

There is no pipe borne water available and the drainage and the sewage system for at least 150 families will have a severe impact on the local environment.

Drawbacks in building tsunami houses

By Shezna Shums

Several negative aspects have been identified in the reconstruction of tsunami affected houses - many of these drawbacks are predicted as disasters in the future, if not rectified immediately.

Problems relating to construction of houses, infrastructure as well as the implementation of the buffer zone have been identified by the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects.

The Sri Lanka Institute of Architects says that although many housing projects are initiated by donor agencies, professional input has not gone into the housing design or planning. The lapse could lead to problems in the future. The institute has made a list of guidelines that have to be met by any agencies

building houses for the victims.

The institute also stated that the rebuilding effort is not taking place as quickly, saying that it is a massive task.

Architects however said that the rebuilding effort is still at most times bogged down.

SLIA, President, Rukshan Widyalkara said that traditionally Sri Lankans are used to living in housing clusters of 25 to 30 houses.

"We have not lived in such large housing projects in the past. We have always been living in what is called the neighbourhood or cluster developments, ranging from about 25 to 30 houses - the neighbourhood is community based, where community space is important." Many of the new housing projects have at least 100 houses being constructed and the number increases to 200, 300 or more.

"In one of the places in the east coast, 1,800 houses are being planned, and in the Sri Lankan tradition such housing complexes of this magnitude were not heard of," Widyalkara said.

SLIA is aware of this issue, but not all NGO or donor housing projects are monitored by this institute. Another huge problem facing the reconstruction of houses is the shortage of building materials and labour. "There is a problem with the availability of materials specially in the east coast where most of the materials come from the uncleared areas of the north and as a result the cost of materials have become very high," the SLIA President said.

Projects need to be properly coordinated according to the experts with attention given to infrastructure. "The house is not the only thing which matters. Things such as road works, drains, sewerage systems are very important," Widyalkara added.

In most instances the donors are not funding road development - the government is in charge of this aspect. At Walahanduwa in Galle where 150 families are to be resettled, the infrastructure remains at a bare minimum. "If the infrastructure part is not planned during the initial stages, you will find that the houses will get flooded during rains and waste flows into the nearby rivers or lakes," Widyalkara said. The architect feels that the buffer zone was taking valuable land from the coastal areas.

"So the density of the rest of the areas will have to be increased. This is something the UDA is looking at and still nothing has been done," the SLIA said. In effect what was a four-storied building outside the zone would need to be six with zoning requirements. "The balance inland areas will have to be compensated for the loss of density in the buffer zones," Widyalkara said.

Galle Road is also one of the country's main arteries and is situated along the southern coast, with the buffer zone land space that is already crowded will get even more crowded.

Meanwhile, the institute also points out that there is already an act, the Coast Conservation Act which oversees the development in the coastal areas. "Authorities have not been able to implement this act properly," highlighted the institute.

"Regarding the buffer zone or how to handle the tsunami, there are other ways like the Japanese experiences with the tsunamis and we have to give priority to those, on how they protect buildings and people with warning systems, and insurance," SLIA added.