

Indian symposium reviews tsunami response

report by Paula Banerjee and Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury

A symposium of academics and human rights activists organised by the Calcutta Research Group assessed the extent to which relief and rehabilitation initiatives in Tamil Nadu and the Andaman and Nicobar islands have recognised the rights of those affected to receive aid without discrimination based on caste, religion or gender.

Tamil Nadu

Speakers at the symposium¹ noted that the first response from the Government of India and the Tamil Nadu state government to the needs of the 2.73 million people affected by the giant waves was hesitant. As initial rescue and relief efforts were led by civil society organisations, government-directed relief efforts failed to recognise that the situation of some groups was worse than others. State programmes were shaped by preconceived notions of relief and rehabilitation needs. Amidst the urgent need to provide food to the most vulnerable, aid agencies were left grappling with confusion created by inconsistent government policies. The needs of many tsunami-affected women, children and aged people and members of the *dalit* (so-called

'untouchables') and other discriminated-against minorities have still not been met.

Although fishing communities have received disproportionately more help than other victims, fewer than a third of fishermen in Tamil Nadu have resumed fishing. Rehabilitation of the fishing communities is being considered from a short-term perspective. Four-fifths of aid to fishing communities has been in the form of loans. Fishermen fear they will not be able to repay them as they have lost most of their belongings. Mining companies involved in sand collection are acting as if no displacement has taken place in the region and their activities are insufficiently regulated. Some families claim their land could have been saved if mining companies had not been allowed to

continue removing sand. Destruction of mangroves has worsened soil erosion.

While there has been no shortage of funds, accountability has been poor. The Asian Development Bank made substantial resources available to the state government, and the Prime Minister's Relief Fund and the Chief Minister's Relief Fund are well-endowed. There is growing demand for greater transparency about the use of available funds both by the government agencies and by NGOs.

Relief operations were often insensitive:

- Wagon-loads of quilts arrived from northern India but were of no use to tsunami-victims in hot and humid Tamil Nadu.
- Donations of poor-quality second-hand clothes were angrily rejected by fishing communities.
- Both district administrators and local *panchayats* (village councils) marginalised women: female civil servants were not deployed to assist in relief operations and male officials were insensitive to the needs of women and chil-

Temporary housing on the beach, Ininthakarai, India.



dren: women, for example, were given sarees but no undergarments.

- Relief money was given to male heads of household – and compensation for lost relatives given to men – without any effort to ensure it was not misspent.
- Photographers jostled each other to get snaps of helpless destitute women.
- Chapattis were provided to people whose staple diet is rice.

Many local and international NGOs with substantial remaining funds are finding it difficult to disburse them as the Government of India's desire to enforce pre-tsunami coastal area regulations prevents the construction of houses for tsunami victims or providing them with livelihood-related assets. The decision to relocate people 200 metres from the shoreline is controversial. There is a lack of transparency about enforcement of the coastal regulations. Many question the legality of the ban and fear that forcible relocation opens the way for multinational corporations to gain control of coastal areas.

There has been no coordination among government departments and no comprehensive rehabilitation policy. The burden of providing proof of entitlement to support has now fallen to the victims. Both political parties and women's organisations have tended to overlook the issue of discrimination against women in tsunami relief operations. The role played by Muslim organisations in relief operations has not been acknowledged. While the government listens to civil society organisations it does not always accept their recommendations.

Government officials seem primarily motivated by the need to maintain their image and avoid critical press coverage. A number of NGOs seem mainly interested in courting favourable media publicity. One participant noted that three sets of people have benefited from the disaster: hotel owners, car rental companies and unscrupulous local NGOs who have earned money from acting as disaster tour guides.

The state still determines who will provide aid and who will not. The role of civil society institutions may be expanding, and the Indian middle classes and non-resident Indians have provided significant resources, but it is still the state which scrutinises civil society, not the other way round.

Continental mindset shapes Andaman and Nicobar assistance

The remote Andaman and Nicobar islands are a series of islands in the Bay of Bengal – stretching over an area of more than 700km from north to south – which lie 1,200 km east of the Indian mainland. Being closer to Sumatra, the Nicobars – entry to which is strictly controlled by the Indian authorities – were worse affected by the tsunami and at least 3,000 people from aboriginal tribes are estimated to have died. The islands lack local democratic governance and legislative structures, and have long been subject to inappropriate development schemes imposed by 'mainlanders'. The damage done by these to the fragile coastal environment had been exacerbated by violations of the coastal no-build zone regulations by members of the local elite and the Indian Air Force.

In the absence of political organisation and civil society, a bureaucratic response to relief requirements was inevitable. The Indian government did not welcome UN or other international assistance in assessing loss and damage. India refused to accept foreign funding for relief operations but encouraged Indian NGOs to transfer money to the local administration. UNICEF was the only international organisation allowed to operate across the archipelago. The International Red Cross complained that its supplies were seized on arrival at Port Blair. Foreign journalists and aid workers were confined to Port Blair and not permitted to travel to any of the outlying islands.

In the absence of any consultation with local communities and the effective sidelining of the civilian administration, relief and rehabilitation operations have been led by the Indian military. It is vital, however, that the views and needs of local people be considered and their indigenous knowledge respected. Nicobarese fishermen, for example, refused to accept the mainland-manufactured fishing equipment provided in the post-tsunami period as it was inappropriate for their needs.

As a result of the disaster, fishing communities in the islands are likely to be affected, mangrove forest to be denuded and corals to be damaged. There is also a risk of major ethnic strife between tribal communities – now only 12% of the population of the islands – and outsiders.

Lessons learned

The tsunami has highlighted the urgent need to rethink the role of the state vis-à-vis civil society and communities in the context of relief operations. Key policy recommendations emerging from the symposium are that:

- There should be greater coordination among relief agencies and sharing of information about disaster impacts and victims' needs.
- Relief should be driven by the needs of affected communities, not supply-driven.
- Tsunami-affected communities should decide what kind of relief is suitable for them: *panchayats* should have a greater role in preparing for, and responding to, disasters.
- Women's voices should be given priority in all aspects of relief and rehabilitation.
- Discrimination in relief provision – on the basis of caste, gender and economic status – must be tackled.
- The special character of the Andaman and Nicobar islands must be considered.
- Government agencies should be more transparent about how they spend post-disaster resources.
- Rehabilitation planners should monitor government land policies and their effects on rural economies.

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A full report of the symposium is online at: www.mcrg.ac.in/tsunami.htm

1. The speakers at the symposium were: Dr. Louis (People's Watch, Tamil Nadu www.pwtn.org); Bimla Chandrasekhar (Ekta Resource Centre for Women, Tamil Nadu www.ektaonline.org); K.M. Parivelan (humanitarian activist, also working at the UNHCR office at Chennai, Tamil Nadu); Partha Guha (Child in Need Institute, Kolkata www.cini-india.org); Samir Acharya (Society for Andaman and Nicobar Ecology www.andaman.org/book/Sane/sanetext.htm) and Subir Bhowmick (CRG member, and BBC employee).