

# Six months on: facing fears

by Lyndon Jeffels

*Since 1987 UNHCR has provided protection and assistance to those displaced by the twenty-year-long civil war in Sri Lanka. UNHCR has extended its role to assist in the post-tsunami humanitarian crisis.*

It was 9.30am on 26 December 2004 when Mary Theresa Rajeswaran heard what she thought was an approaching military vehicle. Cooking in her kitchen, Mary only became concerned when shouts and screams accompanied the roaring noise outside. Taking her daughter Nanthani by the hand, they went to see what was causing the commotion.

Outside, a crowd of people were running towards a hastily receding ocean. Moments later, Mary saw a fifteen foot wave thundering towards her. Protected from the initial impact by a building in front of her house, Mary grabbed Nanthani and ran inland. Finding herself at a dead-end, Mary turned to escape but the first wave had already caught up with her, throwing her and two-year-old Nanthani onto barbed wire fencing. Grabbing at the spikes with one hand and holding her daughter with the other, Mary was half-conscious, realising only that the wave was quickly retreating.

Ampara, Sri Lanka.

Injured and tired, Mary took Nanthani to safety and began looking for her six-year-old son. However, as she started to walk over to the place where she had last seen him, the second wave threw her back onto the barbed wire fencing. "I felt not a single sensation in my body," she says. "I felt nothing but the pain of having lost my son." Dragged by the current for nearly an hour, Mary recalls the ashy hue and warmth of the enveloping sea. Above her she describes the sky as "dark and brooding", with rain persistently hurtling down.

Found by her family sometime later, Mary refused to go to the hospital for treatment. "My son's safety was the most important thing for me. I couldn't leave without knowing he was safe," she explains. It was not until later the same afternoon that Mary's son returned home, having taken sanctuary in his school throughout the tsunami. A relieved Mary was then taken to Point Pedro Hospital. With heavy bruising, twisted limbs and cuts, Mary required seven stitches.

"My husband is not working at present as his boat is broken," Mary declares. "Since the tsunami, we have all been too scared to return to living by the sea. We are now 750 metres inland, safe from any future tsunamis." The dilemma for Mary's family and many others like them is whether or not they should return to the ocean on which their livelihoods have depended for generations or stay away from the shore, safe but without access to a reliable income and the place they used to call home.

## UNHCR's response

In the aftermath of the tsunami, UNHCR has distributed nearly 500,000 non-food relief items to more than 160,000 people. These included plastic sheets, tents, mosquito nets, cooking equipment and utensils, towels, soap, buckets, clothing and other basic items. We have also taken a lead role in supporting the Sri Lankan government's efforts to coordinate the transitional shelter sector. We have worked with partners to bridge the gap between emergency shelter and reconstruction and build temporary houses before the onset of monsoon rains.

UNHCR has developed a variety of guidance documents and checklists

relating to transitional shelter which have been developed in conjunction with beneficiaries, the Sri Lankan authorities and other humanitarian agencies. The UNHCR-convened Shelter and Settlement Forum ensures that gender, environmental and other considerations will be taken into account during construction of transitional and permanent housing for those displaced by the tsunami.

In addition to coordinating this sector, UNHCR is also building around 3,000 temporary shelters in Jaffna and Ampara Districts. Designs vary between locations due to differing climatic, social and local resource factors. 1,408 shelters in Jaffna will







*Distribution of supplies by UNHCR, Point Pedro district, Sri Lanka.*

be completed in June 2005, with 2,442 transitional shelters in Ampara scheduled to be built by September 2005. The transitional shelters in Ampara (measuring 3 x 4 metres) comprise two partitioned rooms, are built within a galvanised iron frame and are compliant with the internationally-recognised SPHERE standards for a family of five. The brick foundation provides a firm impregnable base, with upper walls of plywood. The shelters can be disassembled and reassembled in another location if necessary. The roofs are made of zinc aluminium. Though more expensive than tin, it does not conduct as much heat, ensuring greater comfort for those living inside. The need to keep occupants cool is also recognised through the inclusion of a gap between the top of the outside walls and the zinc aluminium roof.

Those completed in Jaffna will provide safe, dignified and durable shelter for Mary and the rest of her community in Kallady, Point Pedro. Among the others benefiting will be her brother, Thamilagan, who

tragically lost his wife, twin babies, mother-in-law, brother and sister-in-law and their daughter during the tsunami disaster.

Displaced three times by the conflict, Thamilagan, 30, is from Mathar-ankerny in Jaffna. Situated just 50 metres from the coast, his village lost 189 people to the tsunami. Thamilagan describes the sound of "fire crackers and a heavy popping noise" outdoors on the day of the tsunami. The cracks around his front door and windows started to let in water. "Before I knew what was happening, the walls caved in and a rush of water washed away everything in sight," he says. "My father-in-law grabbed the twins but could not hold onto them as the force of the water was too strong."

Floating nearly 1km from his home, Thamilagan eventually tried to make his way back but his foot had been crushed by falling bricks and he could not walk. Found later in the afternoon by the police, Thamilagan was taken to Jaffna Teaching Hospital where he remained for

three days without word as to the whereabouts of his family, before a relative delivered the terrible news. Now severely scarred, crippled with grief and suffering from depression and survivor's guilt, Thamaligan asks: "Why am I the only one alive?" Having earned his living as a fisherman, Thamilagan has a usable boat and work is currently underway to clear the mass of debris blocking the harbour. But the painful memories linger and returning to the sea "will only remind me of those I lost".

This dilemma is echoed throughout all the island's tsunami-affected communities. For now, organisations like UNHCR can only listen and assist those whose lives have been shattered by an ocean which sustained them for so long.

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