

**Asia / Sri Lanka****Disaster capitalism?**

*Eight months after the tsunami, the affected populations in Sri Lanka continue to live in camps, with no clarity about resettlement and resumption of their livelihoods*

**By Herman Kumara of National Fisheries Solidarity (NAFSO)**

“I am still waiting to get land for resettlement. The land I have is situated in the so-called ‘buffer zone’. I have two daughters and we are now living in an unsafe situation, as it is not safe for young girls to live in temporary huts like this. I am really worried about the future of my children.”

These plaintive words come from Johara Hamy, one of the 90,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) now living in camps in Sri Lanka. She is a woman leader of District Fisheries Solidarity (DIFSO) and a tsunami victim from Pothuwil, Ampara, on the east coast of the country. Ampara was among those districts worst hit by the tsunami.

It is now eight months since the tsunami struck coastal countries in the Indian Ocean. The world responded with great concern and generosity after the tsunami and substantial amounts were raised to support relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts among affected communities.

With the resources available at hand, Chandrika Bandaranaike, the President of Sri Lanka, in her address to the nation, said: “We will provide everything lost by the affected communities but the lives of the people”.

To fulfil this pledge, a special task force called the ‘Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation’ (TAFREN) was appointed. TAFREN is composed of eight businessmen, who are also linked to the tourism industry. The first step that TAFREN took was for regulation of the coastal buffer zone. A majority of the people who wanted to go back and resettle on their own lands were not even allowed to build a temporary shelter in the buffer zone.

“My house and kitchen were partially damaged by the tsunami waves. The Southern Fisheries Organization (SFO) was to help repair my house and kitchen. However, the police did not allow us to undertake the repairs as my house is situated within the coastal buffer zone. I have received the LKR5,000 (US\$50) subsidy only twice although it has been announced that the payments will be up to a period of six months,” says Lalanie Kalupahana, the ex-secretary of SFO, Galle. She is from Dodanduwa, in Galle District, a village located next to Hikkaduwa, one among the other proposed tourist zones.

The plan prepared by TAFREN came out within 17 days of the tsunami, on 13 January 2005. Most importantly, 62 townships, large harbours and superhighways as well as 15 tourism zones were part of the proposals. This was besides the proposed privatization of the water, electricity and petroleum utilities, and also the privatization of phosphate deposits at Eppawala.

TAFREN’s plan was to promote tourism and attract investors. The tourism development plan of the Sri Lanka Tourist Board says: “In a cruel twist of fate, nature has presented Sri Lanka with a unique opportunity, and out of this great tragedy will come a world-class tourism destination”.

This is the principle behind the whole planning process for tourism. But we need to see how it will affect the displaced people in the camps. It is important to understand how the affected communities view these plans and their potential impact on their lives and communities.

“We are living here in Arugambay. It is a tourist zone. Most of the tourists come here for surfing. We are not permitted to build our house or even a temporary shelter, while hoteliers are allowed to build and repair their hotels in the same buffer zone. Some of them have built hotels within 15 m of the shore. Why this indifference to us?” asks one victim.

“This is disaster capitalism amidst a highly devastated world,” as Naomi Klein, renowned Canadian researcher and writer, says.



People are not ignorant. They know what is happening to their lives. They know that, in the name of the tsunami, they are being displaced further from the shore and that they will lose ownership over not only the land but also the sea.

“We learnt that the European Union is planning to send their decommissioned fishing vessels to Sri Lanka. We do not know how this decision was made. We were not consulted by anyone. Such a transfer of fleet will displace our beach-based fisheries industry, replacing it with harbour-based fisheries. Small-scale fishers will suffer from all these short-sighted activities,” says Lalanie Klupahana, a victim from Dodanduwa.

“The government did not consult us about our preferences. We do not want to leave our land. Besides, fishing is our occupation and we need to continue it for our survival,” says Johara. Affected communities are not just giving up. They want to save their land and sea from the investors who want to buy their land to build hotels and develop other businesses.

“We went to the streets to mark 200 days of the tsunami, to protest against unjust government policies. We want to go to the court with the help of our organizations. We have given several alternative proposals to support tsunami victims. We will not

allow anyone to drive us out from the land and sea we own. We know we will win the battle”, says Lalanie.

“This courage and strength will be put together to fight for the rights of the people against the unjust TAFREN plans. We will protest both tourism master plans and any other business plans prepared by the so-called TAFREN. We will support a people’s planning process to demand justice for the tsunami victims as well as the poor people in the country. Only then can we challenge the unjust plans and defeat them,” continues Lalanie.

“To achieve this, we are visiting tsunami- and war-affected people’s camps to consult the people there about the kind of development they hope for, to organize women and affected communities for their rights, to take legal action against discrimination and human rights violations, to prepare alternative plans through a People’s Planning Commission and to promote face-to-face dialogue with policymakers. Farmers’ organizations, plantation workers’ unions, trade unions, women’s groups and fisheries organizations have got together for this work,” says Geetha Lakmini of the National Fisheries Solidarity (NAFSO).

“The government had promised that it would provide for people’s basic needs and livelihoods within six months after the tsunami struck. But now it is already eight months and the victims are still in IDP camps. Around 400,000 people are displaced and are with their relatives or friends. There is no sign of their resettlement in the near future,” adds Geetha Lakmini.

The people’s struggle started 200 days after the tsunami struck Sri Lanka, and will continue until the victims wrest their rights to relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction, as promised by the leaders. “We will never give up until our people receive justice. We will work to join all forces together to win the battle,” Geetha concludes.

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