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Building efforts in Pulo Aceh not put off by challenges

BUILDING of new homes for 118 families in the fishing village of Meulingge on Pulo Aceh began on 26 July soon after JRS Indonesia has overcome difficult bureaucratic and natural challenges. As of Sep 2005, 40 houses have been built.

JRS decided to help the internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Pulo Aceh, Krueng Raya, Lamsenia, and Kecamatan Jaya as they have received little or no help.

Strong winds and waves have made travelling to Pulo Aceh, an isolated island three hours by boat from Banda Aceh, impossible on some days, causing repeated delays. Poor communications in Pulo Aceh have also made it necessary to invest in radio and satellite phones.

Getting the local community involved in its projects is one of JRS guiding principles

and JRS staff have consulted the villagers at every stage of the development.



Building houses in Pulo Aceh

By involving the villagers, it promotes ownership and prevents the development of a 'handout' mentality.

Security situation in several areas remains unstable, and poses a serious challenge to humanitarian efforts. JRS operates in several insecure areas, such as Krueng Raya (Great Aceh), Idi Cut and Simpang Ulim (East Aceh), Tapaktuan (South Aceh) and Lamno (Aceh Jaya).

Eight months after the tsunami, JRS Indonesia continues relentlessly to provide IDPs with education, health, livelihood and emergency help (source: JRS Indonesia).

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NEWS

Advent Project in support for Shan refugees

Church of Christ the King will be organising an Advent project to raise awareness and support for Shan refugees in North Thailand. With the help of JRS, a small team of parishioners will be visiting the Shan refugees in October.



Did the gods and the seas abandon them? Eight months after the Tsunami, survivors struggle to find answers

In one deadly stroke, last year's tsunami swept away more than 150,000 lives, including the thousands who had attended mass at Vailankanni, the famous Shrine of Our Lady, south of Chennai, India. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami inflicted new suffering to the divided nation, destroying 18 churches, 16 temples and 12 Buddhist temples. To the simple fishing folks, the devastation remained incomprehensible. Was the tsunami God's punishment? Why did 'mother sea' – their source of livelihood – turned against them? Eight months on, survivors continue to grapple with questions of faith and guilt.

Fr C Amalraj SJ, former director of JRS Liberia, and present coordinator of Jesuit tsunami projects in India, shares how the tsunami has made every survivor, a Job, and why the church should do more to rebuild the human spirit, the loss of faith.

THIRTY days after the deadly Tsunami struck the Asian Countries, I was standing near a mass grave inside a jungle, in Mullaitivu, Sri Lanka. The stench was overwhelming. As we about to leave, we heard loud sobs and saw a very young woman, lying over one part of the grave, violently beating her breasts.

"My boy lies inside," she said when we approached her. This young mother lost her boy of two years when the waves snatched her baby from her hands on that fateful day.

"I am a sinner," she said. "I should have gone with him. But now he lies here, amidst all strangers. We do not have a grave for him. Worse still the waves carried everything from my house, including all the photos of him. When shall I see his face?"

Unable to console her, we wondered at the trail of shatterness brought by the tsunami.

Determined to do something for all the survivors, we participated in many activities for the last eight months. But how does one rebuild people like her?

to biblical character: Tsunami made every survivor a Job in the Old Testament is the quintessential sufferer, where the Gods themselves play the role of sadistic bystanders.

The woman is from Mullaitivu, the scene of a ferocious civil conflict in Sri Lanka. For the last three years, there was an interlude of peace.

Young women can get married, children can play in the streets, and the old can sleep without the edginess. There might not be enough food, but sleep was there. So they thought.

Till nature came to them with a greater punishment.

Bearing the guilt of survival

Soon after Tsunami, the survivors underwent a roller coaster guilt: why did we survive? We remember a man in Tricomallee in Sri Lanka, who refused to accept any NGO assistance. "It is a treachery to my dead wife and children to sell their loss to get a house". Unable to forget the gory scenes when they saw their loved ones snatched from them, many considered that survival was a condemnation to grieve.

They need help to rebuild their faith and trust



“They brought us some hope for the first time. Our children looked for them everyday, and laughter broke when they came. Life is reasserted”,

said a grateful old woman about the visit of simple nuns who came to listen, play with the children and even shed tears

Betrayed by the gods and seas?

Most of the victims were fishermen who had great affinity to the seas. In India and Sri Lanka, fishing communities are one of the most impoverished. To them, the sea was their mother, their livelihood and nourishment. Every fisherman reverentially enters the seas as if entering a temple. On that fateful day, the mother turned cannibalistic, devouring her sons and daughters with a ravenous hunger.

Einstein once proclaimed candidly: God does not play dice with the Universe. But to the thousands who had suffered from the tsunami, Shakespeare probably reflected more closely their feelings:

“Like flies unto wanton boys, we are unto gods; They kill us for their sport”
– King Lear

Many unanswered questions

After eight months, the real challenge remains. How to build trust between the people and their ‘mother’ sea and their gods? This is the first hurdle in any rehabilitation. The spiritual and the ecological basis of these people took a battering. Money may be available. Hope?

A fisherwoman in Kottilpadu in Kannyakumari, a historic district in Tamil Nadu famed for its churches and temples wryly told us: our gods and the seas betrayed us.

Gods? They became a nagging question. “Why us?” Churches in the coastal districts bore the brunt. In the heart and soul of every survivor was the question: Why did our gods and the seas punish us?

Faith took a thrashing on that fateful morning - where was God that day?

Faith. That brings us to the question: Is Tsunami rehabilitation just a ‘humanitarian intervention’? Is there a role for churches, religious leaders and community leaders to engage the people in rebuilding the faith? In many NGO meetings, ‘strategies’ and ‘contingency planning’ were discussed over ‘power point presentations’. In many places, a humanitarian stampede greeted the survivors, including indecent turf wars waged to ‘own’ the victims.

The ‘victims’ really need huge financial assistance. Undoubtedly planned rehabilitation is vital to heal the wounds. Church too needs to be part of the rebuilding efforts.

Most needed is human touch

But it needs to be started with rebuilding the people, their faith, their trust in themselves. It is where human, pastoral accompaniment matters.

We remember the visit to the camps of Mullaitivu, where hundreds were housed in dingy old buildings.

An old woman told us how the visit of simple nuns played a major role through their unassuming presence, listening to them, playing with their children, crying with those who cried.

“They brought us some hope for the first time. Our children looked for them everyday, and laughter broke when they came. Life is reasserted”.

Miracles are little acts of kindness from a fellow human being. In Batticalao in Sri Lanka, the first people who rushed to help the Tamils were the Buddhists, for long at loggerheads with the Tamil Tigers. The much maligned Sri Lankan Army, saved many Tamils in Dutch Bar, before they themselves perished.

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**Thank you for
making our work
with refugee's
possible.**

Battling fear of the sea

Seas and gods need to re-enter the lives of people. "Where else can we go?" says a woman in Colachel. "For ages, we have known only the sea".

Commendable efforts to revive faith in the sea are done. In many places the district officials took to the seas to allay the fears. The Bishop of Kottar undertook a boat journey following the aftermath of tsunami.

The fact that the sea was not a monster, but a mother during the tsunami is not explained to the simple survivors. The earthquake had released heat of a staggering magnitude; the total energy released could boil 150 litres of water for every person on earth. The earth's population is more than 6 billion! And the total energy of the tsunami waves was more than twice the total explosive energy used during all of World War II (including the two atomic bombs!)

Contrary to the accusation of the victims, the ocean served as a shock absorber, taking in monstrous shocks and heat. If not for the sea, the death toll could be in millions, not thousands.

This simple message needs to be carried to the people. It is where the Church which has a strong presence in the coastal belt, needs to play a major role.

About Our Organization...

JRS is an international Catholic organization with a mission to accompany, serve and plead for the rights of refugees and internally displaced people. JRS was founded by the Jesuits in 1980 and the priority is to be where the need is greatest or where no other organisation is present.

The return to the sea is vital for revival of livelihood. NGOs have unfortunately given the impression of availability of funds for everything. Unless the people themselves are part of their rehabilitation, this once proud people could be reduced to just 'beneficiaries'. They need to regain their faith.

Church's role in restoring faith

Tsunami was a direct attack on the survivors' faith. Till today there has not been a reflection by any church group on this. People were left to grope for answers. Fundamental groups sadistically preached of 'God's punishment'.

Did God act in all this? Maybe. Tsunami attack has no easy solutions.

God revealed in world's compassion

So much of goodness flowed out of the human heart after tsunami. Compassion without borders was exhibited. Human beings showed that God is not a tenant in the sky but Emmanuel, revealing himself in every good act.

That is the message that would rebuild the thousands. Apart from the money that is pooled in for rehabilitation, the sense that the world stands with them is a great trigger for resilience in the coastal areas. Their seas and their Gods will walk with them in their journey of hope.