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Connecting people for effective and efficient recovery in the NorthEast of Sri Lanka

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Five Year Anniversary of the 2004 Tsunami

5 Years On

Today International Tamils Rehabilitation Organization (iTRO) staff and volunteers worldwide honored the memory of those killed in the 26 December 2004 Tsunami, 27 of whom were TRO staff. Five years after the death and destruction of the tsunami much work has been completed and many lives rebuilt by TRO Sri Lanka and others in the humanitarian community.

The initial tsunami response showed the best part of humanity as all communities and organizations came together to assist those in need. Unfortunately, this did not last long and today thousands of families in the NorthEast of Sri Lanka who were originally affected by the tsunami have continued to face displacement, trauma, death and destruction. Today, many remain confined in internment camps after being displaced from the Mullaitivu District due to war. Others in the East and South of the country have yet to be resettled due land availability and a variety of other issues including being displaced by war. Much of the tsunami aid donated for these communities in the NorthEast, especially the LTTE controlled areas, was never spent due to problems of access and transportation of materials. It is now time to honor the wishes of the donors and spend that aid to rebuild the lives of those communities.

The recent war caused a tremendous amount of death and suffering to civilians, the extent of which may never be known or comprehended, additionally, thousands of tsunami houses and other infrastructure that had been completed, or were close to being completed, have been destroyed by the fighting. TRO Sri Lanka was the only NGO that continued to provide assistance to those in the 'safe zone' until the very end. In doing so 19 TRO staff were killed in shelling or bombings.

Now that the war is over it is paramount that the needs of **all** internally displaced persons (IDPs) must be immediately addressed and all necessary measures must be taken to ensure that the IDPs are able to return to their original homes, villages or lands. This includes those displaced due to colonization in the pre-1983 era, those displaced between 1983 and 2002, the Muslim IDPs in the Puttalam District who were displaced from the North, those displaced by the 2004 tsunami, those displaced by the fighting in 2007/8 in the East, and the 300,000 plus who have been displaced from the Vanni in 2008/9.

These IDPs need resettlement, rehabilitation, and reconstruction and the entire NorthEast is in dire need of development after more than 30 years of war and 30 years of neglect prior to the outbreak of war. Development can, at times, be used as a political tool to create 'winners' and 'losers' and reward sections of society or communities over others. The expected development of the NorthEast must not be a continuation of war by other means.

An Appeal

International TRO appeals to the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL), in the spirit of 'post-war' reconciliation and for the benefit of those who continue to suffer, to remove the ban on TRO Sri Lanka, release all TRO Staff held in the camps or in the custody of the police or armed forces, and release the US\$ 700,000 in TRO Sri Lanka accounts intended for tsunami affected communities that the GoSL froze in September 2006. After registering with the GoSL in 2003 and after the 2004 tsunami, TRO Sri Lanka quickly became recognized as one of the most effective, dedicated, and capable NGOs in the country while working with all three communities: Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala. TRO Sri Lanka partnered with and received funds from the GoSL, UNICEF, UNDP, IOM, Save the Children in Sri Lanka, and hundreds of other international NGOs and foreign governments. TRO was completely transparent and accountable in all of these projects and partnerships. Even the President of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Kumaratunga Banadnariake, recognized this fact and presented TRO Sri Lanka an award for constructing over 10,000 temporary shelters after the Tsunami.

Additionally, TRO Sri Lanka is an organization with specific expertise and experience operating in the NorthEast under difficult conditions. TRO and iTRO have in the past, after the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement and the 2004 Tsunami, been able to mobilize Tamil Diaspora experts, some of whom are internationally recognized leaders in their fields, to return to the NorthEast to lend their expertise to development projects.

This is the time for the GoSL to engage with the Tamil Diaspora as a partner in the reconstruction, rehabilitation, and development of the NorthEast. Removing the ban on TRO Sri Lanka will go a long way towards rebuilding the confidence of the Tamil Diaspora that the GoSL will not freeze or otherwise impede Tamil Diaspora funds sent for

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reconstruction and development and that the GoSL is sincere in its claim that reconciliation is a priority. TRO is well placed to facilitate this as it maintains the confidence of the Tamil Diaspora and can quickly rebuild its infrastructure in the NorthEast if allowed to operate.

Recommendations

International TRO further recommends that the following be incorporated into development and reconstruction projects in the NorthEast:

1. IDPs (as mentioned above) - **all** IDPs must be immediately addressed and all necessary measures must be taken to ensure that the IDPs are able to return to their original homes, villages or lands;
2. Free and open access to the NorthEast by the humanitarian community (ICRC, UN, national and international NGOs), the international and national media, the Tamil Diaspora and any others who may so wish;
3. Gender, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and conflict sensitivity - no project should exacerbate the current issues or lead to a further degradation of the situation, the projects should instead help to reconcile all communities;
4. Projects must adhere to all international and national humanitarian, human rights, development, and environmental laws and standards.
5. All stakeholders, especially local communities and beneficiaries, must be fully consulted and their inputs must be incorporated from the start (conception and design) to finish (implementation and conclusion) of the project
6. All development should be designed in such a way that local capacities, livelihoods, and resources are developed and utilized and that all projects have local 'ownership'.
7. The GoSL and the international humanitarian community should work in a coordinated, transparent and accountable manner with frequent and in depth consultation with the targeted communities and community leaders.

Accountability & Transparency

TRO Sri Lanka, between 2003 and when the GoSL banned the organization on 26 December 2007, met or exceeded all local and international standards of accountability and transparency and consistently met all the legal requirements of an NGO or charity operating in Sri Lanka. Since registering with the GoSL as a Charity, TRO Sri Lanka has responded to all requests for financial and project information from the Ministry of Social Services promptly and exhaustively. All annual reports, progress reports, and financial reports have been regularly submitted to the relevant authorities and TRO Sri Lanka has had its projects and accounts audited and certified each year by an independent Colombo based auditor. Additionally, many of TRO's numerous donors such as the European Union (ECHO), United Nations (UN) agencies, international NGOs and foreign governments have performed exhaustive audits of the projects and programs that they have funded and have found them to be in order.

Frozen TRO Bank Accounts

The GoSL froze the TRO Sri Lanka accounts on 4 September 2006. These accounts contain approximately SL Rs. 80,000,000 (US\$ 700,000; £440,000 at 2009 exchange rates) which were intended for Tsunami related projects to benefit the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala communities of the NorthEast. Eighty percent (80%) of the funds in the frozen bank accounts were project funds provided by over 100 international NGOs, UN Agencies, foreign governments and the GoSL for projects that TRO was implementing to rehabilitate tsunami and war affected populations. The remaining twenty percent (20%) of the funds were donated by the Tamil Diaspora.

- ENDS -

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