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RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CHURCH

**Diocese of
Colombo, Sri Lanka**

**Internal displacement
Crisis 2010**



Church Solidarity team with IDPs from the "Karuna Nilayam" Centre. Killinochchi (Home of Compassion), at one of the camps shortly before their release

What happened in Sri Lanka ?

Sri Lanka suffered a 28-year-long conflict between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Ethnicity, political participation and power sharing, social conditions, religious and old grievances were all aspects of this confrontation. The last phase of the conflict was between late 2008 and May 2009 before the final defeat of the LTTE leadership in the north eastern parts of the country. This period saw a massive internal displacement of people (IDP) which generated a humanitarian crisis. The Diocese of Colombo was present, responding to the emergency and help-

Situation of the displaced communities

Around 300.000 people were caught up in the middle of the confrontation in the North and North Eastern part of country known as the "Vanni", and fled to the districts of Mannar, Jaffna, Trincomalee and Vavuniya. In addition to the frequent difficulties present within camps such as overcrowding, sanitation, shortages of food, medical personnel etc. there were additional challenges in Sri Lanka:



Shelter occupied by family in the Killinochchi Distr

- * Concerns about the infiltration of LTTE combatants among the civil population within the camps. As a result, screening procedures were established as well as the restriction of free movement.
- * The camps were affected by heavy rains and winds, leaving flooded areas.
- * Restricted access for relief organisations to the camps and to the conflict areas
- * Return to home towns was severely compromised due to landmines and also the destruction of housing and infrastructure.
- * Families were tore apart and lost contact.

How the church responded?

The church 's response might be understood in two phases

Phase 1: during the IDP crisis

During the crisis, the church had a considerable strength since it had parishes in the affected areas of Trincomalee, Jaffna and Vavuniya. It was able to transfer volunteers from the south parts of the country to the northern areas in order to reinforce the work of the overstrained clergy. The church launched a national and international appeal for funds and was able to implement the following actions:



Worshippers at the "Community of Witness" – Cheddikulam

Provision of relief items:

Clothing, toiletries pack, nutritional supplements, bedding in Trincomalee, Ayurvedic hospitals and Vavuniya General Hospital.

Food supplements, toiletries, bottled water, bedding, clothes, plates, cups and flasks, (worth over 10.000 \$US) in several IDP camps.

Mediation with authorities

The church successfully intervened with the authorities for the release of mentally handicapped people from the fighting area into the care of the clergy. The church provided shelter for them as well as to various orphaned girls.

Advocacy

Advocacy work at Central Government level and with local security force commanders regarding facilities for IDPs.

Community of witness and welcome centres

Clergy and community gathered together to discuss, reflect and pray on the nature of the witness that they were called upon to bear in this particular situation. It was also a space for IDPS to talk, to share, read a newspaper and to rest for a while. The church also carried out solidarity visits to the affected communities.

Ecumenical work

Links were established with the Roman Catholic clergy in Cheddikulam, with several Orders of Sisters and with the Franciscan Brothers, in order to share our experiences and benefiting from our joint resources in the ministry of the Christian Church to the IDP 's.

Phase 2: the returning process

The work of the church evolved with the changing situation brought about by the gradual release of IDPs from the camps and the start of the resettlement process. However, all rehabilitation and development work in the former battle zones required the sanction of the body set up by the government known as the "Presidential Task Force " for the Northern Province. These procedures involved the submission of proposals and budgets, their clearance and approval and regular reporting. Despite the church had an advantage since it could work independently and generally outside these requirements, security clearance for staff and liaison with local administration to avoid duplication of work resulted in some delay. Other new activities included:

Provision of Items

The work now shifted from distribution of relief material to temporary shelters, cooking utensils and livelihood support. However, the church continued helping those left in the camps.

Housing

The church initiated the construction of 100 semi permanent units in the districts of Jaffna, Killinochchi and Mullaitivu. Each of these two roomed houses had an area of 250 square feet and a life span of 2 to 3 years

Education

Responding to the need for pre-school education for children below 5 years, the diocese set up 5 schools which doubled as nutritional feeding centres in Killinochchi, Dharmapuram and Pallai, as well as Uduturai in the Jaffna district and Thaneerotru in the Mullaitvu district.



Children at Killinochchi Pre-school

Prisoner 's welfare

Thousands of people were still held in detention suspected of involvement with the LTTE. Upon request to the military, the church was able to provide them with sports goods for recreation

Support for people with disabilities

The church provided mattresses and chairs to amputees at "Sahanagama " camp in Pulmoddai, Trincomalee. Likewise, working together with the Good Shepherds Sisters of the Catholic Church it was possible to provide commode chairs to former female LTTE cadre amputees at the PPM Camp, Vavuniya.

Rebuilding the Diocese' s own structures

The Dioceses begun to repair churches, mission houses, parish halls, pre-school buildings destroyed or damaged during the war. In the Karuna Nilayam complex in Killinochchi 7 out of 12 building needed rebuilding or extensive repairs.



Rear of the damaged St. Andrew' s Pallai

In December of 2010 pastoral care and regular worship services were re initiated in churches closed for more than a year in the Vanni area.

Centre of refuge, worship and care

As an evolution of the "community of witness " initiative in Cheddikulam the centre started to be used for several purposes. A communion service was held every month, followed by a fellowship meal with the participation of 50-60 persons. Several programmes were carried out to raise awareness on common medical problems, befriending and counselling of widows and young mothers. Another centre was opened in Killinochchi.

Anglican Alliance

In the Anglican Alliance we want to know, to share and to highlight the relief experiences of churches around the world. The church plays a very important role during emergencies and we want to support it and also that it gets recognised. If you have an experience to share or you want to know more about this initiative, please contact us at: anglicanalliance@aco.org