

Tsunami Victims' Perceptions of the Proposed Buffer Zone and its Implications in Eastern Sri Lanka

N. Shanmugaratnam¹

The government seems to be more interested in enforcing the 200-meter-ban than addressing our needs in a comprehensive manner. The concern it professes about our future security sounds hollow when nobody from the government has so far bothered to engage in dialogues with the victims to find out their views and preferences regarding the future.

- A young university graduate from Maruthamunai (28 February 2005)

We are determined to keep our land but we as a group will consider housing in a safer place only if we can continue with our fishing and farming as we have been doing until two months ago. But we are worried that someone will take our land with the help of the government. We have heard that foreigners want to build hotels on our beach.

- A displaced woman from Komari (28 February 2005)

They were among the first to be hit by the tsunami in Sri Lanka. Yet, two months after the disaster their lives remained shattered and the vast majority of them were being haunted by fear and uncertainty about the future. This message recurred powerfully throughout my conversations with groups of tsunami-displaced men, women and children along the eastern coast from Komari in the south to Verugal on the Batticaloa-Trincomalee border. In two days of field visits, I tried to gather and understand the affected people's perceptions regarding the proposed 200 meters buffer zone (for the North-East) and its implications for their livelihoods. The government's decision was taken under a state of Emergency and without any consultation with the victims or their representatives. It has also come to light that the government had not sought professional advice on this highly complex issue. Recent interventions in the media by knowledgeable persons suggest that the government's decision was ill informed, arbitrary and might even be legally unsound. However, the state machinery has already been directed to enforce the buffer zone rule under Emergency Regulations. In the East, government officials, especially the Divisional Secretaries and Grama Sevakas (Village Officers) are busy advising and instructing tsunami victims that they should abide by the buffer zone rule for their own future security. Many tsunami victims I met were under the impression that the buffer zone had legal sanction. This 'new law' as perceived by the innocent victims has created new concerns among them about relocation and livelihood security. In the absence of a systematic campaign to enlighten the people on the probability of a tsunami occurring in the future and how to be prepared for it, the buffer-zone-approach seems to have reinforced the fears of the victims. It is in such circumstances of psychological stress and inadequate information that the people are being compelled to take major decisions. In this article I present what I heard from the tsunami victims I met and some of my own observations.

¹ Professor of Development Studies, Department of International Environment & Development Studies, Noragric, Box 5003, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, N-1432 Aas, Norway. Email: nsh@UMB.NO

Mixed Perceptions

The perceptions regarding relocation to 'safer areas' were mixed. There were persons who believed that relocation would save them from a future tsunami, which could happen any time. The fear of another tsunami occurring in their lifetime seemed to be the sole reason for them to prefer relocation to 'safer areas'. However, the same people had other concerns about the choice of location. There were groups that regarded the whole idea of a buffer zone as unrealistic and unacceptable. These people were keen to go back to their habitats and rebuild their lives, and there were others who were undecided. Moreover, there was widespread suspicion whether the government had a hidden agenda to promote privatisation and commercialisation of the coastal zone resources. Many also feared that the army might be used to enforce the buffer zone and military camps and high security zones might be set up on their lands in the future. It was obvious that the people were in need of more detailed and accurate information and assurances. It appeared that the local officials were not informed enough to provide clear answers to questions the people had.

The tsunami struck this region on top of the ravages inflicted on it by a protracted war. The spatial and socio-economic impact of the latter was uneven in the North-East. However, the war had generated new grievances concerning livelihood security and human development among wider sections of the people including coastal communities. It had already weakened the capacities of many who survived the tsunami to cope with the shock and its after effects. Further, the peculiarities of the political economy of the fishing communities have always kept most of the fishers on the margins of livelihood failure. Small groups of big boat owners and middlemen dominate the sector. Majority of the fishers operate small boats or work for a wage. Most of the small fishers are locked in asymmetrical relationships with middlemen on whom they are dependent for credit to carry on their fishing and to whom they are obliged to sell their harvest. In many cases the middlemen are the real owners of the boats and nets used by small fishermen. This relationship keeps the small fishers in a constant state of livelihood insecurity. The tsunami has thrown the small and the waged fishers into a world of destitution, which may be seen as a new opportunity by middlemen. And these vulnerable groups found themselves in a state of confusion, anxiety and uncertainty when they heard of the government's '200 meter ban'.

It may be relevant to look at the LTTE's position on relocation as some of the areas I visited are under their control. To my knowledge, the LTTE has not formally rejected or accepted the government's decision. However, an official document of the LTTE (Post Tsunami Reconstruction, Planning and Development Secretariat, LTTE, January 2005), states that a participatory approach should be adopted where relocation is necessitated by circumstances. It would seem that the LTTE is for relocation beyond 200 meters from the sea wherever land is available, as for example in Mullaitivu. In Vadamarachchi in the North, tsunami-displaced fishers told me that it was practically not possible for them to observe even a 50 meters buffer zone and they had made it known to both the government and the LTTE that relocation was out of the question. Among the people I met in the LTTE-controlled areas in the East, many seemed to be in favour of relocation but had more or less the same concerns as their fellow victims

in government-controlled areas regarding livelihood security and their lands close to the sea.

Safe housing is a part of livelihood security

A fundamental concern shared by all the displaced groups I interacted with was that relocation could not be seen in isolation from livelihood security, which implied people's ability to achieve decent states of being. Housing is an integral part of a household's livelihood system. The livelihoods of the affected people on the eastern coast were diverse and households often combined different activities such as sea and lagoon fishing, farming, trade, and waged employment. Migration to the Middle East for employment was not uncommon. However, fishing was the mainstay for the majority until they were partially or totally dispossessed by the tsunami. 'We paid a heavy price for living too close to the sea', said a leader of the displaced fisher families from Pasikuda-Kalkuda, 'and now we would like to move to a safer area but that has to be close enough to the sea, our beach and landing sites. The government wants us to move to Kumburumoolai, which is miles away from our coast. Going there is out of the question. If the government insists on relocating us, we will fight to the last for a more suitable location or to return to our village.' There were 115 displaced families from Pasikuda-Kalkuda now living in temporary huts on a land belonging to a local resident. They had lost 208 people, mostly women and children.

The leader had more to say about what he perceived as 'hasty efforts' by local bureaucrats to relocate his community to Kumburumoolai. 'The Divisional Secretary seems so determined to pack us off to that place. She does not seem to know that our chief occupation is fishing which cannot be practised in Kumburumoolai. Nor would it be practical for us to live there, so far away, and fish in Pasikuda. You see we have our rights to fish in Pasikuda-Kalkuda, land our catch on the beach and keep our boats and dry our nets there. Anyone with some knowledge of fishing will tell you that fishermen need to constantly observe the sea for signs of fish movements and tidal changes. How can we do this if we lived miles away from the site of our occupation? We are especially fortunate to be in Pasikuda-Kalkuda because it is a shallow bay in which we can fish all year round, unlike in other areas where the sea turns too rough for fishing during September to November/December. Of course, Kumburumoolai might have been acceptable if we were farmers. In fact, some families that depend mainly on farming have decided to accept the government's offer and move to Kumburumoolai.'

He went on to say that past governments had toyed with the idea of relocating the fishing communities of Pasikuda-Kalkuda to some other area to clear the beach for tourism development. He wondered if the same idea was behind the current move too. He said that his group had identified a suitable area that meets both the government's buffer zone rule and the community's need. 'It is only 300 meters away and there is enough land for all of us. But most of the land is privately owned, which means the owners have to be willing to sell and the government has to be willing to assist us to buy. We have talked to our MP who has promised to get the land for us. If that fails, we will have no option but to return to our village.' Relocation was not the only issue that worried this group. Like the others, they wondered how to find the resources to revive their livelihoods and move away from humanitarian relief.

The situation was even more acute in highly densely populated Kalmunai and Maruthamunai, which had the highest death toll in the whole country. More than 11,300 died in Kalmunai alone. It did not seem practically possible to find suitable land in sufficient quantity within a reasonable distance from the sea in these areas for the affected fisher families to be relocated. There was no vacant land even to set up a temporary camp for the displaced. ‘Settlements have extended right to the edge of the sea because of the lack of land. Here, relocation can only mean migration to an area many miles away. I do not think anyone is prepared for it. I certainly am not’, said a displaced person in Kalmunai. The other displaced fishers I met in Kalmunai and Maruthamunai expressed similar sentiments. One of them said, ‘we are not opposing relocation blindly. If land were available beyond say 50 meters from the sea, I would consider relocating. The important point is that 100 or 200 meters buffer zone makes no sense here. Perhaps some may have other options, but for most of us there is no option but to return to our coast, start fishing and rebuild our lives.’ He said that about 50 meters of land was already lost to sea as a result of the tsunami and complained that it was difficult to do coastal fishing because debris had been dumped on the coast. The fishers of Kalmunai staged a mass demonstration on 24 February, nearly two months after the tsunami, to voice their demands and concerns. They demanded free and exclusive access to the proposed buffer zone and registered their opposition to any future use of their lands for security camps or tourist hotels and industries. They appealed for financial assistance to rebuild their fishing assets.

The displaced from Kathiraveli, which lies in an LTTE-controlled area, seemed to have reached a consensus to relocate. There were 275 families living in tents provided by an international NGO, which they said was doing things in close consultation with them. There were another 138 families from the neighbouring village of Poochakerni in the same camp. Many from these two groups practised both fishing and farming and some were also migrant workers. ‘We have suffered too much to go back to the same place to live. We lost 53 lives. We have decided to move to a safer area. There is enough land for all of us. An international organisation has promised to assist us’, said a spokesperson. However, there was a dissenting voice. ‘I want to go back to where I have lived for 45 years. My land is just outside the 200 meters limit. It has a well and I have already started putting up a hut there. The land identified for relocation is a bit too far from the coast. I am sure there will be practical problems regarding taking care of the boats and nets, which have to be left on the beach. People will realise only after moving there’, said a 60 years old man. ‘Of course, we are not giving up our lands. We shall put up *wadiyas* (huts) on our beach to keep our nets and other things and for us to stay. The Grama sevaka (village officer) has informed us that the government in Colombo will not take our land’, said the spokesperson. A woman sounded a sceptical note: ‘yes but what does the Grama sevaka know about the plans the government may have? Has any government kept its word in this country? We have an acre of homestead with some coconut trees. I did a lot of home gardening and I will go back to our land and start doing it again. My husband is a fisherman and I am a farmer. We must have at least a hut on our land so that we can continue to practise both.’ She said that soon after the tsunami when the international NGO asked them what their first priority was they said ‘housing’ in one voice. The NGO then began to work on their first priority. ‘But now, after two months of living on relief, we feel reviving our own economic activities is also equally important. Now we think it was a mistake not to make both housing and getting back to fishing or some other work such as farming as the first priority.’

A young fisherman responded: 'well, we have missed a great opportunity to make some good money because we don't have our boats and prawn nets. This is the prawn season, which began in January and will last till the end of March. A man known to me made 30,000 rupees the other day because he had a big catch of high value prawns. His boat was not damaged because it was anchored in a safe place.' He said that ideally there should have been a scheme to provide them with soft loans to revive their fishing during the prawn season, as it would have helped them recover faster with the high income from prawns. He was not talking of grants but soft loans to invest in the basic capital goods to revive fishing. He was aware that banks would not lend to disaster-stricken, assetless fishers. He talked of a special group credit scheme involving the fishermen's organisation and a willing NGO as partners. 'But I am not going to wait for it. This is just an idea, which might not interest anyone. Now I am prepared to do any job including farm labour in neighbouring Sinhalese areas until I am able to return to fishing', he said.

Perceptions regarding post-tsunami reconstruction in the South

A widespread view among the people I met in the East was that the government, while neglecting them, was providing a lot of assistance to tsunami victims in the South. 'I have been listening to the radio ever since the tsunami struck', said a displaced man from Thambiluvil, 'everyday a new programme is being launched by some minister in the South. The President opened a big project in Hambantota the other day. Something is happening there everyday but nothing here. Many ministers and powerful politicians are there to take care of them.' It was quite common to hear such statements. Apparently they were not aware yet of the complaints and protests by the tsunami victims in the South. When I told them about this, the immediate response was, 'well we should start our own protests too'. They had serious doubts about the commitment and capacity of the government to address their grievances. However, everyone, Tamil and Muslim, I spoke to remembered with deep feelings the material and moral support they received from fellow Lankans. In Kathiraveli, Tamils recalled with emotions how a Sinhalese from far away Moneragala and some Muslims from a neighbouring area brought cooked food for them.

Need for Rethinking

The government's decision to introduce a buffer zone without consulting the people concerned has created confusion and uncertainty amongst them. Recently, the government has publicised the steps it was taking regarding the enforcement of the buffer zone, housing of tsunami-affected people and tourism development. 'The government', says an official advertisement, 'will set up special Tourism Zones covering all the tourist areas in the coastal belt. These zones will have modern infrastructure with an unencumbered view and access to the coast. There will be special incentives provided to promote sustainable and value added tourism.' (Daily Mirror, March 2, 2005)

The most widespread concern among the coastal communities in the country as a whole is that that the government has framed post-tsunami reconstruction as a programme of privatisation and commercialisation of the coastal zone and marine

resources without paying adequate attention to their long-term livelihood security. The fishing communities in particular have valid reasons to fear that they may lose their customary rights to coastal zone resources. An activist in the south of the country told me that, 'the policy of tourism development and large-scale privatisation of fisheries is likely to accelerate the ongoing marginalisation and exclusion of sections of the coastal communities. Tourist hotels and the recreation industry will effectively privatise long tracts of our beaches. There will of course be some local beneficiaries but many small fishers including women are likely to lose their traditional livelihoods and become displaced and unemployed or under-employed. This is why we are speaking of a second tsunami and the only way to prevent it is to defend the right to livelihood of the vulnerable sections of the coastal communities.' Campaigns and protests have already been mounted in the South and in the East. The signs are clear that the people are not happy with the government's policy and its handling of the post-tsunami recovery. In many parts of the North-East, post tsunami reconstruction cannot easily be separated from the tasks of rebuilding war-torn communities and livelihoods. The government and the LTTE have yet to reach an understanding regarding a joint mechanism for reconstruction. An opportunity to link reconstruction, reconciliation and peacebuilding seems to be drifting away. The use of emergency regulations and militarisation to enforce the buffer zone is ill advised. The consequences could be disastrous if this is not abandoned in favour of a better informed and more realistic approach that would take account of the ecological and socio-economic variations and the views of the affected people in the coastal zones.

March 5, 2005