

UN Roundtable on Older Persons in the 2004 Tsunami

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**THE HORRIBLE FATE OF THE LONELY AND FORGOTTEN
OLD PEOPLE WHO SURVIVED TSUNAMI**

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Old people had lost everything they have lived for in the twilight of their hard life. One year has passed since the fatal Tsunami struck. The 26th of December 2005 was a very emotional day. Relatives and friends of Tsunami victims had their ceremonies in remembrance of their loved ones. Oil lamps were burning along the coastline and in many houses and gardens. Priests of all religions took part in public and private ceremonies. As there were not enough priests available on the 26th itself these ceremonies were conducted from the 23rd until 28th in Weligama alone.

The sufferings and burden of the old generation is neglected and ignored by most of us. It is this generation, who not only lost children and grandchildren, husbands and wives, they lost every single thing they have owned and hard worked for in so many years of their life. They are the ones along with the smallest of children who were physically unable to escape the enormous waves. They were totally helpless.

It was heartbreaking to see friends and family members not only mourning their beloved ones, but still living under horrible conditions cramped up in camps and ruins of their destroyed houses.

There is plenty of help for the young ones. They are looked after. Donors are doing so much for the children and the younger generation.

But the old people suffered most. However, in fact all the old, helpless persons cannot even enjoy their basic human rights as such as there are no proper facilities and no emergency plan implemented for them: Their right to food, shelter and clothing.

As there are no data available about Tsunami survivors, no Tsunami statistic center existing, no resources, no thinkers, no implementers, no collection of data and statistics, no checking on accurate statistic and no analyzing, there is only a rough estimated figure available about displaced older persons in the Matara and Galle Districts in Southern Sri Lanka. This estimate is that there are at least 160,000 displaced old persons in just two out of three districts in the Southern Province, which got badly affected by the Tsunami.

But interestingly there are figures available about the dead people. According to official figures 454 people died in Weligama: 151 old persons were above 60 years and 46 elderly people were between 50 and 59 years old. Those together are almost 45 % of the people who lost their lives in Weligama alone.

21 out of 86 administration areas of Weligama have been affected by Tsunami. More than 20000 displaced people lived in 26 camps during January 2005, before they were moved to temporary shelters, other camps and relatives. Some preferred to resettle in their ruined houses. Up to date only 82 out of more than 1000 destroyed and damaged houses are newly

built, that are not even 10%. 16 houses were built by the Jayawickreme Foundation so far in the Tsunami ravaged area.

Tsunami made old people homeless, ripped them off their community life with no social control and social responsibilities left. The old people were stuffed in camps and almost forgotten. I remember the first days very well, when I went into temple and school halls to see who has not got anything of the basics needs we were distributing yet. With disbelief I realized many old people squatting and laying on the small space of a mat with empty eyes under deep shock. Nobody cared. The younger ones were busy collecting donations. Immediately the Jayawickreme Foundation saw that the old people got their share of the donations as well according to name lists we demanded from the camp inmates.

In Sri Lanka old people depend on their families to survive, as most of them do not get pension money. Grandparents are looking after the grandchildren, because the mothers and often fathers too are working abroad to make money for the living. Naturally it is very difficult for them to cope with the loss of grandchildren and other close relatives and in addition the loss of property, which were all their responsibility. Moreover there is no supportive structure in the camps and temporary shelters.

The suicide tendency has increased after the Tsunami, as there is hardly any counseling at all leave alone for the old people. Loneliness, depression and frustration are still very much present. The words “I want to die” are very common among the elderly, who are so badly affected by this horrible disaster depression, which makes matters worse for them.

Being deprived of any tasks and responsibilities old people are living like vegetables in camps. They do not have any opportunity to communicate even. There is almost nobody who cares about and caters to their fears, worries, needs and urgent requirements.

Family care and structured village life they are used to does not longer exist in those small temporary shelters. Nobody helps the elderly to get regularly food, tea and to see to their personal hygiene etc.

In one camp made of awful dark windowless metal huts we met a 73 years old man who suffered from cataract after Tsunami. His 4 sons and 1 daughter are also living in this camp. Now after one year of silent suffering in his corner hut neighbours told us about his blind fate. We arranged the operation, but it was impossible to convince one of the 4 sons to accompany the almost blind father to hospital. Finally, after many talks my husband succeeded and the daughter agreed to bring the father to hospital. According to medical sources the numbers of cases of cataract and malnutrition are many after Tsunami.

There are old people who have lost a leg due to injuries. If elderly Tsunami affected people are lonely individuals then the disabled ones are in a worse situation. They even cannot use the local squatting toilet pans any longer alone, they do not have any privacy. We helped a 65 years old man to build a proper bathroom for disabled persons. I will never forget his beaming eyes already imagining having privacy in the bathroom again.

Most of these old people still live by the sea and relive the trauma every day and night again and again. Shockingly even today more than one year

after Tsunami there are those who remain in temporary shelters, which are hardly able to withstand the monsoons and the dry periods, when the temperatures reach baking oven proportions.

When I am in the camp with the windowless rusty metal huts, the roofs and walls full of holes, where the rain and sun beams trickle through I am reminded of shanties and slums. Suddenly all these people cramped up here have fallen down the social ladder innocently and lost their pride.

Diseases and sickness are a daily plight. Healthcare is not regular. My husband negotiated with the local hospital to send doctors after we found out that many people were suffering from various diseases like malnutrition, lack of vitamins, unbalanced diet etc. One 76 years old woman i.e. has had problems while breathing and was coughing all the time. After getting medical attention she is cured today.

However this old woman like all the other old inmates as well have given up hope to spend a decent life in a decent house and to enjoy as individuals their basic human rights again, their right to food, shelter and clothing. Tears of despair are their daily companions. There is no counseling for them.

Many women faced sexual and physical harassment as a result of having to live in open spaces, in camps, in tents or in ruins. Men, who were themselves frustrated and full of grief, drank their sorrows away and it is everybody's guess what happens in situations like this.

According to several donor initiatives I spoke to there be no specific projects for old persons who survived Tsunami, but many projects for

children. What we should always keep in mind is that the children are the old people of the day after tomorrow; we are the old people of tomorrow. Without the old people of today we would not exist.

There is no family care, no village security, no social environment, no income security, no health and nutrition centers, no counseling facilities, no community centers and no spiritual centers for old people affected by Tsunami, just to name a few.

It is high time to create awareness, to care for a better future and set a landmark example for today's elderly, which will be benefiting our children as well as they are the ones who might care about us tomorrow.

Remember that one year means just 365 days more for most of us, but the very same one year has been and still is living hell for those, in particular the old people, who have been unfortunate enough to get caught by the sudden killer waves, which destroyed their lives, which took their loved ones, which destroyed everything they had after a fulfilled hard working life in the twilight of their life.

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