

Press Release: Human Rights of Tsunami Survivors in Andaman and Nicobar Islands Being Violated

Report Reveals Violations of Tsunami Survivor's Human Rights to Housing, Land and Livelihood in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

"Battered Islands" – a report on a fact-finding mission to the tsunami-affected areas of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by the Housing and Land Rights Network, New Delhi – highlights the dire situation with regard to human rights of tsunami survivors in the Islands. A fact-finding team visited several affected islands in January and February 2006, a year after the tsunami, to study the situation of the affected and their living conditions.

It is tragic that even after a year and a half after the December 2004 tsunami, people continue to live in makeshift shelters and are yet to be adequately rehabilitated. The situation in the Islands typifies what happens once the early enthusiasm and activity surrounding an emergency dies down. The report points out the pervading sense of neglect and betrayal among survivors and a feeling of fatigue, as patience and endurance levels are repeatedly tested and tried. It focuses on the shelter and housing component of rehabilitation in the Islands through the lens of human rights. A situational analysis revealed that intermediate shelters constructed across the Islands do not meet international human rights standards of "adequate housing." Instead the small tin structures are largely uninhabitable due to their tendency to trap heat and humidity. A woman from Great Nicobar Island is quoted in the report as saying the shelters are like "toasters." They also threaten privacy and safety, especially of women, since they are built in lines with common partitions that do not reach the ceiling. Sanitation and solid waste management facilities are largely absent in most sites while drinking water shortages are acute.

Across the Islands, the report reveals that rehabilitation is slow and consultation with people has been minimal. Though the Administration has recently finalized designs for permanent housing, local communities have not had any say in the final plans, which continue to be rife with controversy. Wastage of resources are rampant, be it through the construction of defunct toilets, the provision of unnecessary wheelbarrows for garbage collection, or the transportation of non-durable pre-fabricated construction sheets from the mainland.

Shivani Chaudhry from the Housing and Land Rights Network, one of the members of the fact-finding team asserts, "The remoteness of the Islands can in no way condone the obvious disrespect for the human rights of the survivors. While rehabilitation is conducted in a very top-down manner with no space for community participation, critical issues such as housing and livelihood are still not being given the priority they require." Enakshi Ganguly Thukral, a child rights activist working with HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, another member of the team, mentioned the severe and long-lasting impacts on children and negligence on part of the authorities in providing them with the systematic attention they deserved.

While several actors are involved in rehabilitation work and most of them well-intentioned, coordination between them in most areas is insufficient. "Relocation of displaced communities, especially tribals evacuated to other islands, is a major concern as people have not been consulted and have been forced to settle in areas predetermined by the Administration", says the report. Another egregious issue with post-tsunami rehabilitation is that women's needs have not been adequately considered. The authors express concern about the "gender-neutral" nature of resettlement and rehabilitation processes and plans, thus leading to specific concerns of women remaining unaddressed.

Recommendations made to government and non-government agencies as well as other involved actors such as funders, include the need for participatory and in-depth consultations with communities, immediate recognition of the inadequacies of intermediate shelters and urgent redressal of persistent housing problems; incorporation of human rights standards of "adequacy" into any plans for permanent housing; provision of special facilities for women and children, including the

establishment of functional Child Welfare Committees. The report urgently calls for all involved agencies to adhere to internationally accepted human rights standards and develop a strong human rights-based approach to long-term rehabilitation work. The authors assert that "the right to humanitarian relief and rehabilitation must be recognized and upheld as a basic human right and cannot be viewed as charity."

For more information, including to request a copy of the report, please write to: schaudhry@hic-sarp.org
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