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### **Waiting to go home**

After the 2004 tsunami more than 500,000 people lost their homes. The recent escalation of the internal conflict is making the situation worse and has highlighted the inequalities faced by tsunami versus conflict-displaced people. On 26 December 2004 the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated Sri Lanka's coastline, killing 35,322 people and displacing over 500,000.\* To date, 314,378 people continue to live in transitional shelters or with family members.\*\*

However, these numbers represent just a little over *half* of all internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sri Lanka (561,626 in total)\*\*. The remaining 247,248\*\* are homeless and living in welfare centres or with their families as a result of being displaced by the armed conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan security forces.

The conflict - which has continued for over 20 years – began when the LTTE began to make demands for an independent homeland in the north and east of the island. Many conflict IDPs have been displaced for decades, with no prospect of a durable solution.

While there has been progress on reconstruction of houses, roads, schools and health clinics following the tsunami, allocation of land and housing for tsunami and conflict IDPs still remains unequal.

By November 2005 all tsunami IDPs had been moved from emergency to transitional shelters which, though small, are of a reasonable standard. In contrast, in December 2005, AI delegates visited welfare centres housing conflict IDPs, which were dilapidated, cramped and lacking in privacy and infrastructure.

While the government has found land to resettle those displaced by the tsunami, there has been a real lack of political will to find land to resettle those conflict IDPs who are not able to return home and would like to resettle or locally integrate.

Since December 2005, the rapidly deteriorating security situation in the north and east has put the already vulnerable situation of IDPs at further risk. Despite direct talks between the government and the LTTE on 22 and 23 February 2006, the low level intensity conflict has continued to escalate. Over 700 hundred people including civilians have been killed during the last six months.

Following a market bomb on 12 April 2006, and subsequent air strikes by government security forces in Trincomalee District, a total of 32,081 people (comprising of 9,039 families) have been displaced and are living in temporary shelters.\*\* Thousands of people who have already been displaced several times are facing displacement again.

Areas in which humanitarian agencies can work safely are also shrinking; in May 2006 unknown assailants threw hand grenades into the offices of three international aid groups providing services to IDPs.

Amnesty International is calling on all parties in the conflict to avoid actions which harm civilians; AI is also calling on the Sri Lankan government to provide increased

security for IDPs who are more vulnerable due to the escalating violence. In the longer term, the Sri Lankan government and its partners must continue their work of providing durable solutions for all IDPs – facilitating their return home, resettlement or local re-integration, to enable them to begin to rebuild their lives.

\* Joint report of the Government of Sri Lanka and Development Partners, Post Tsunami Recovery and Reconstruction Dec 2005.

\*\* UNHCR figures taken from statistical summary as at 30 April 2006.

*“My village people’s whole life is here. Not just one day or two days – their life.”*  
Local businessman Rupa Chandra, Arugam Bay

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Anandhi (not her real name) was first displaced in 1978 by communal riots and then fled her home again in 1990 because of fighting between the LTTE and the SLA. She was renting a home in Batticaloa town when the tsunami struck, destroying the house where she lived. Anandhi was originally given emergency shelter in the school together with 18 other families. However 12 of those families, who had owned their homes that were destroyed by the tsunami, were later moved to transitional shelters. Anandhi reported that local government officials told the four remaining families they were not entitled to transitional shelter because they were tenants.

Anandhi and the four other families cannot leave the school as they have nowhere to go. The principal of the school is becoming increasingly threatening in his efforts to get the remaining four families to leave the school. A local government official told her that she should buy land and that the state would then build her a house on it. However not only does Anandhi not have sufficient money to buy land, she also does not have enough money for a deposit to rent a new home. Her family is very poor and before the tsunami they were living on property belonging to a religious charity, for which they had not paid rent for a long time. Anandhi is frightened about the future and desperately wants a permanent home for her family.

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Jayarani (not her real name) was living in an IDP camp with her husband. She lost her parents and children in the tsunami. One day a friend came to the IDP camp and told her that her husband had been shot nearby. She believes that he was killed by the LTTE.

Jayarani has now lost all her family. She is despairing and believes that she too might be killed. She wants help from the authorities to move to a different place where she will not be at risk.

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Muttiah Canagaratnam and his family were first displaced from their home in Kilinochchi in 1985, due to aggression by the SLA. The family walked over 100km to Mannar from where they took a boat to India. They spent three years living in an Indian government refugee camp, but returned to Sri Lanka in 1988 after UNHCR had reportedly advised them that it was safe to return. Muttiah Canagaratnam reported that he never received Rs. 25,000 (around \$250) for shelter as promised by the local government authorities.

Muttiah and his family were displaced again in 1990, as violence escalated. The family again walked to Mannar and took a boat to India, where they stayed in a refugee camp for another two years. In 1992 they decided to return to Sri Lanka and were supported by UNHCR to travel to Trincomalee by boat. From there the family were brought to Sithamparapuram welfare centre in Vavuniya, where they remained for the next 13 years.

Muttiah Canagaratnam and his family have spent most of the last two decades as IDPs or refugees and have been denied the opportunity to build any permanent life. He has been promised many times that he will be given land – but he has now lost hope that this will ever happen.



Woman and child wait for aid in a camp following the tsunami, Onthatchimadam, Sri Lanka.



Salma Abubakar, age 44, Hijranagar village, Ampara. A Tamil conflict IDP who received the tin shelter because her livelihood was affected by the tsunami



Kinnya, Trincomalee. Muslim tsunami IDPs living in temporary housing shelter camp.



Tamil conflict IDPs in welfare centre in Vavuniya