

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Three years after Tsunami

On this third anniversary of the Tsunami disaster, Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) remembers with great sadness all those who lost their lives and their family members, who survived them. It is these individuals that showed us the way to tread a path for better Sri Lanka.

At this juncture, TISL recognizes with gratitude all the public and private partners who contributed to the reconstruction process in Sri Lanka. Whilst acknowledging the positive contribution and progress, TISL would like to draw the attention of the public and the government to certain unresolved issues and lessons that the nation could learn, with special emphasis to issues within the transparency and accountability framework.

TISL strongly believes that it is the duty of the Sri Lankan State to collate and document all the issues which made it challenging to realize the desired objectives of the reconstruction process. This is a rare opportunity for the nation to prepare itself for any future catastrophe in order to minimize any future negative outcomes as well to assure a positive recovery process.

The recent assignments carried out by TISL in the South and the East of the island, and the subsequent TISL project which received complaints from the affected communities through a hotline, revealed a number of unresolved issues emerging from the reconstruction process.

It is common to find a general level of dissatisfaction among the residents of newly built houses, particularly in the South. This dissatisfaction is well supported in most cases where poor quality houses or culturally and environmentally insensitive construction challenge the healthy occupancy of the houses. However, it is critical to provide a redress mechanism wherein solutions should be found to rectify such defects, as and when pointed out.

The entire reconstruction process was lacking an inherent system for the survivors and beneficiaries to access information. People living in new schemes were given no information about financial expenditure and at times plans and legal documents of title of their new facilities. It is a legitimate expectation on the part of the beneficiaries to seek information as to the process of building and financial cost of their house. However, few in the community were privy to such information.

The detrimental effect of politicization of Sri Lankan society continued to taint the tsunami recovery process too. Certain tsunami districts which obtained political patronage through highly influential politicians, received a disproportionate influx of aid. Political interference in selecting beneficiaries were a common complaint. This caused acute delays in occupying certain housing schemes where prolonged disputes continued between affected communities and officials.

Although the government claims that 99497 houses have been completed, exceeding the total requirement of 98525 houses, there is an acute shortage of houses in the Eastern province of the country. For example, in Muttur only 422 houses were built through donor and owner driven housing construction programs in place of 1249 houses destroyed. Thus the government statistics represent a misleading picture of ground realities. Therefore TISL reiterates the duty of the Sri Lankan Government to guarantee and respect the right to housing of the affected communities in the North and the East.

There are number of systemic issues in various sectors which hindered the effective implementation of the recovery process. For example, it is common to find allegations of bribery and corruption against Grama Sevaka Officers and Fisheries Inspectors who played a key role in both immediate relief and the subsequent reconstruction process at the ground level. Therefore, TISL urges the relevant government ministries to identify such systemic issues which fall within their purview and to derive remedial measures. One such remedial measure TISL suggests, is for the incorporation of anti-corruption education into the initial Grama Seva officer training programs conducted by the Ministry of Public Administration.

No mechanism has been setup for monitoring and/or evaluation in the recovery process. Therefore people are left with no recourse to address their grievances. Village committees set up in certain affected areas for overall supervision failed to win the confidence of the people. In most cases, the communities were even unaware about the members of such committees. Large scale reconstruction processes such as this essentially needs a system to receive complaints relating to corruption. TISL firmly believes that the government should establish a formal complaint procedure even at this stage. Such a mechanism would help to assess the overall quality of the present process as well as to identify the crucial problematic areas.

A Brief Financial Analysis

The following table shows the financial situation of Tsunami Reconstruction work by the end of the year 2006. This information was obtained from the Development Assistance Data Base (DAD) in March 2007. However this information is not currently available for the public as the DAD website doesn't exist anymore.

TISL's effort to obtain the most recent financial information from RADA was met with lackluster responses by the officials. TISL's observation in this regard was that officials were either reluctant to divulge the proper information or that they did not have the accurate figures about current expenditure status.

Available statistics as per March 2007:

Committed (LKR)	Disbursed (LKR)	Expended (LKR)
241,537,479,923	122,130,378,286	68,533,124,662

Note:

- Committed funds - Funds promised by the donors
- Disbursed - Funds handed over to the implementing agencies
- Expended - Funds spent on various projects

According to the information, there is a difference between the committed and the disbursed funds. When inquiring about this difference, the implementing agencies informed TISL that the amounts of money initially promised was not disbursed by the donors, mainly due to the deadlines of these projects not being met. Some donors have not been satisfied with the progress of the projects and have therefore withdrawn from their commitment after paying the first installment.

The difference between the disbursed and the expended has been a controversial issue that does not have a credible explanation. While some officials were reluctant to divulge the information, there were some responsible bodies who implied that the funds have been utilized by the government for other purposes. There is no precise evidence to explain the missing sum of Rs 53,597,253,625.

TISL also noted that the first year Tsunami Report was issued jointly by the Government of Sri Lanka and Development Partners (multi-lateral donors, international financial authorities, bi lateral and other donors and civil society). However the second year report appears to be issued under the hand of the Government of Sri Lanka only.

According to RADA Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation, Ministry of Urban Development, Ministry of Food, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Foreign Affairs collaborated with the donors in obtaining funds and their subsequent disbursement. Hence it is the duty of these ministries to declare the current status of financial information to the people. Although there was a supervisory body called "Centre for National Operation" under the director scrutiny of the President of Sri Lanka, the role of this institution is rather unclear to the general public.

Since the last Audit Report by the Former Auditor General of Sri Lanka in 2005, there is no audit conducted by the Auditor General Department. Thus the overall picture on finances is ambiguous and left for speculation.

Conclusions:

- a. TISL believes that it is a prime right of the people in Sri Lanka to know the true picture of tsunami recovery process. Therefore the government should take every possible step to assure and respect the right to information of the general public of the country.
- b. All steps should be taken to arrest and remedy the existing problems in the recovery process. The participation of the public is paramount in this regard.
- c. The Auditor General be asked to pick at random from a list of all significant government led Tsunami reconstruction projects of the various sectors including housing and subject them to Post Implementation Reviews (PIR) and Value for Money Audits with findings being reviewed for lessons for the future
- d. A special Committee of the Public Accounts Committee or an Independent Commission be constituted to review issues relating Tsunami Recovery Process and make necessary recommendations and lessons learnt related guidelines for the future
- e. Finally TISL reiterates the importance of collating and documenting all the information of Tsunami 2004, in relation to both the relief and recovery process. Such deliberation is important both within the context of right of our future generation and sustainable development.

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Notes to Editors:

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) is the National Chapter of Transparency International (TI), the leading global movement against corruption. TISL is one of over 90 in Transparency International Global Network fighting the menace of corruption.

Transparency International, the global civil society organisation leading the fight against corruption, bringing people together in a powerful worldwide coalition to end the devastating impact of corruption on men, women and children around the world.

TI's mission is to create change towards a world free of corruption.

More information on TISL available at <http://www.tisrilanka.org>