The scene near Patong beach, Phuket, southern Thailand, just after the tsunami and now

TSUNAMI
ONE YEAR LATER

- Despite aid, much rebuilding remains | SERIES BEGINS, A4-5
- Then-and-now photos | THE FOLD, A42-43
The massive Indian Ocean tsunami that struck almost without warning a year ago today has been described by relief experts as one of the worst natural disasters in recent history. Upward of 250,000 people died and tens of thousands were left homeless. The catastrophe reached from Indonesia in the east to the coast of Africa — some 4,000 miles away — and eight countries suffered major casualties and damage. The rebuilding effort is under way — more successfully in some regions than others. For instance, at least half of the tsunami survivors who had lost their jobs have returned to work, the aid group Oxfam has reported. But environmental groups have noted that nearly nothing has been done to fix the damage done along vast stretches of Asia’s coastline.

Aid has helped scores of survivors, but many remain bereft, grief-stricken

First of four parts

BY INDRANI SEN
SPECIAL TO NEWSDAY

NAGAPATTINAM, India has been done to help Thilagavatha in the year since she lost her husband, two children, house and left hand to the tsunami that devastated 38 fishing villages on India’s southeast coast. A government compensation of 200,000 rupees, or $4,450, for her losses has helped cover basic expenses. An international charity is providing for the education of her two surviving teenage daughters. She has had medical care and psychological counseling.

But a year has done little to soothe her grief. Thilagavatha, 37, cries when she tells of the wave that washed away her husband and adult son as they emptied fishing nets on the shore — the same wave that hurled stones at her as she tried to carry her fourth and youngest child to safety.

“The stones came and I lost my child and I lost my hand. That moment is still in my eyes.”

Moving on is difficult for Thilagavatha. Like most of the 17,500 families in Nagapattinam who lost their homes, she is still living in temporary shelter. The death toll in Nagapattinam province in the state of Tamil Nadu was 6,065 — the worst hit province in India with two-thirds of the country’s deaths.

“We don’t know where is our permanent shelter; we don’t know where is our permanent house,” said Thangasamy, 43, who lost his wife and both parents and is raising his 14-year-old son alone. “We don’t have our permanent life even.”

The problem is not unique to India. In a recent report on tsunami victims across Asia and Africa, the relief group Oxfam estimated only one in five would be in adequate permanent housing by today — the one-year anniversary of the Dec. 26, 2004, catastrophe. Government officials in Nagapattinam said 1,850 houses have been built since that date and another 14,000 will be completed by April.

Charity and government officials acknowledge that the frenetic pace of the relief effort in the weeks following the disaster slowed considerably after a couple of months as the government began the complicated process of buying land for permanent housing.

“Land in India is a huge problem,” said Pradeep Singh, national director of SOS Children’s Villages of India. “The government has to buy the land. They can’t evict people. And that’s why it’s taking so long.”

His charity, which is building 535 houses in Nagapattinam, has halted construction, Singh said, because it can’t afford to buy land. "India is a huge country," he said, “but there’s not much land left for permanent housing.”

Thilagavatha

IN THE FOLD: A look at reconstruction efforts in areas hit by the tsunami. A40-41

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four villages, has started construction only recently because it took months for the government to secure the necessary land.

"The biggest bottleneck . . . was the community decision to choose the land," said Collector J. Radhakrishnan, the district’s highest-level administrator. "Suppose I build a beautiful colony where fishermen do not want to live? It will become an unused colony."

Fishing industry hurting
Easy access to the sea is important to fishermen and their families. Many want to live near their former homes but, for obvious reasons, the government programs will not provide funding for building within 220 yards of the water.

"The whole village has to agree," Singh said. "So if 10 villagers say we don’t want to go to that place for social, cultural, religious reasons, you can’t go . . . the amount of work that goes into it, the amount of bringing people together, the amount of coordination is tremendous."

There have been allegations of petty corruption but no confirmed reports of large-scale graft, and the authorities have dismissed as ludicrous rumors that hotels will spring up in the ruins of the tsunami.

Getting the job done right is more important than getting it done quickly, say some involved in the rebuilding efforts. Xavier Joseph, project manager of a reconstruction project by the South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies, points to the hasty distribution by charities of new fishing boats to villages wreaked by the tsunami, which he said has led to overfishing and smaller yields per boat in some areas and left others still short of boats.

His group, which advocates for fishermen and organizes them into cooperatives, is rebuilding 1,500 houses in Tharangambadi, a village in Nagapattinam that lost 291 people. The federation’s strictly “participatory approach,” in which villagers choose the style of house they want and local elected councils make most major decisions, takes time, Joseph said, but is worth the effort.

Meanwhile, children play in the rubble of destroyed houses and make forts of broken boats amid the temporary huts of corrugated metal and thatch that now make up Tharangambadi. Foundations are being dug for new houses and new, brightly painted fishing boats line the beach. Outside the cooperative fish marketing center, fishermen say government funds and charity donations have helped enormously.

"Actually, I am now far better off than before the tsunami," reflected Veran, 22, after he helped load fish into a buyer’s truck. “Except for the house.”