

Asian tsunami

Worst-affected yet to get relief

By Jay Shankar

Disaster Relief & donations

NAGAPATTINAM (India): Billions of dollars of aid was pledged after the tsunamis lashed the Asian shorelines but six months later most of it has yet to reach survivors due to corruption, politics and renegeing by donor countries, officials say.

In a report assessing the situation at the end of April, independent Indian research group, the Institute for Human Development, said only 39 per cent of the 6.7 billion dollars pledged by governments, agencies and private donors had reached those whose lives were shattered by the December 26 tsunamis.

The report sponsored by ActionAid, one of Britain's largest development charities, found that of the 350 million dollars initially pledged by the United States, only 35 per cent had been paid as of April 20.

Other nations, the report said, were also renegeing on their promises, with 84 per cent of Germany's total pledged aid of some 1.2 billion dollars yet to see the light of day. Norway has paid up only 55 per cent of its 170-million-dollar pledge.

"Such donor behaviour seriously jeopardizes the process of recovery and the international community needs to undertake stringent measures in order to overcome this failure," the report, made available to AFP, noted.

According to a tally by AFP, using official figures of governments and donor agencies, the total amount of tsunami aid pledged as of mid-June stood at around 10 billion dollars.

In Indonesia, where 128,000 people perished in the tsunamis, of the seven billion dollars pledged only 1.8 billion dollars has actually been handed over.

Even that amount has been under the scanner due to the country's tainted bureaucracy.

Luki Jani, campaign coordinator for Indonesia Corruption Watch, an independent body which works for the promotion of democracy and good governance, said corrupt officials were siphoning off funds.

The man charged with rebuilding Indonesia's battered Aceh province, Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, denied this, saying that although the government had managed to keep corruption at bay in distributing relief aid, he still faced an uphill battle.

"This is a very difficult task for us. We are not very proud of our past record when it comes to corruption," he told AFP.

Apichart Nooplod, the deputy finance chief for Phuket province, was arrested late in April and charged with stealing 50,000 dollars in government money meant to help victims.

India, where the tsunamis killed 12,405 people, too is not free of graft and red tape despite the fact that it spurned offers of bilateral aid.

The Indian government announced an aid package of 36.5 billion rupees (810 million dollars) for rehabilitation and reconstruction, including providing new boats for fishermen and the repair of harbours, but much of it is still snared in a bureaucratic web, relief workers say.

External agencies such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank pledged 763.5 million dollars while India is currently in negotiations with multilateral agencies and the UN for an additional 38.8 million dollars.

"There are lot of problems in the distribution of aid," said Jesu Rethinam, chief of Coastal Action Network, a campaign group.

"It has been a very slow process and survivors have to get signatures of bureaucrats to encash money.

"When the final money is sanctioned it is very much less than what was promised," she said. "There is certainly a lot of corruption within the system."

"In India the story of this disaster is quite different," said V. Vivekanandan, chief executive of South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies. "There are many distortions in aid distribution due to competition between organizations and non-governmental agencies."

He said there was an overemphasis on helping regions and groups which were more 'visibly' affected by the tsunami and where there were more deaths.

"There is competition to support visible forms of aid such as shelters. And agencies are smothering smaller villages with boats, fishing nets and aid. Smaller villages are becoming the dumping ground for aid," Vivekanandan told AFP.

"Nobody wants to take in the worst-affected and bigger villages because the population is higher and more money needs to be pumped in," he said.

Like their Indonesian counterparts, Indian survivors, many of whom stay in tin-roof temporary shelters, say they have received only half or less of the promised money from the gov-

ernment of Nagapattinam, said of the 200,000 rupees promised by the government he had received only 80,000 rupees.

"The government doles are very low and running out. My boat has been smashed by the tsunamis beyond recognition. They (government) said money will be granted soon but it is already six months now," Jayaraman said.

Survivors housed at Dusun Gano, a hamlet on the outskirts of Indonesia's Banda Aceh where only 750 people out of 2,500 villagers survived the tsunamis, said despite promises by the government, aid was hard to come by.

The government dole was two months behind schedule, while some, like Armansyah said he was yet to receive any aid whatsoever.

Unlike other regions, Sri Lanka's tsunami aid is caught in a bitter political battle.

The main Marxist coalition partner quit Sri Lanka's government in protest at President Chandrika Kumaratunga's plans to share tsunami aid with Tamil Tiger rebels.

However, the actual flow of aid has been slow and aid workers said bureaucracy is partly to blame and that there are several instances of administrative bottlenecks holding up reconstruction efforts.

In a country where the tsunamis left 31,000 people dead, only 1.6 billion dollars has been paid out of the three billion dollars pledged to help rebuild Sri Lanka's devastated coastal infrastructure.

As in other Asian nations, the Sri Lankan aid too has been in the form of grants or loans.

A private Indian research firm said donor packages were increasingly including a sizeable aid portion earmarked for 'governance reforms'.

The Institute for Human Development warned the 'human face' of these aid packages was a masquerade for 'donor-driven agenda'.

"Humanitarian aid extended for the purpose of relief and recovery after the tsunami is no different wherein donors continue to integrate conditionalities and conditions for effecting market reforms with aid packages," it said.

"If ethical humanitarian work is not only about what you intend to do but also how well you do it and to whom you are responsible, the largest aid effort in the history of humani-

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