FEATURE-Lucky tsunami survivors begin moving to new homes

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By Bill Tarrant

HIKKADUWA, Sri Lanka, May 29 (Reuters) - Stumbling in the tropical heat after a 40-hour flight from St. Louis in the United States, volunteers from the evangelical charity Service International have been put right to work building homes for Sri Lankan tsunami survivors.

Working alongside rehabilitating heroin addicts from a Sri Lankan Christian activist group, they are building simple 336-square-foot cement block homes in Hikkaduwa, a budget beach resort on Sri Lanka's tsunami-battered southwest coast.

"Our dream is to build 100 homes," said Ed Fasnacht, Service International's supervisor for the project. "There's 55,000 homes that need to be built, so there's plenty of room for everyone."

The cement block homes with asbestos roof tiles are going up in the midst of temporary wooden shacks, which house the survivors now. Across the street is one of the many tiny, tattered tent camps that dot Sri Lanka's coastline.

This neighbourhood, where 14 of the 21 tsunami victims were children, is home to a group of Tamil Hindus and Christians who come from the lowest strata of society.

But they are among the first of Sri Lanka's half-million people displaced in the disaster to get permanent homes. And so the last shall be first.

The project illustrates certain features of the recovery effort after one of the strongest earthquakes in history set off a colossal tsunami last Dec. 26 that killed an estimated 228,000 people in a dozen Indian Ocean nations.

Five months after the disaster, the reconstruction effort has barely begun.

Progress has been uneven, leading to concerns about how equitable the effort is. And it is being spearheaded by private aid groups, many of them little-known outfits such as Service International working with local counterparts.

Billions of dollars in private aid raised across the world -- from girl scout raffles, bowling leagues, Rotarians and Unitarians, Jewish bake sales and Islamic charities -- are being channelled to a veritable Noah's Ark of aid groups.

HOME AT LAST FOR SEA GYPSIES

As in Sri Lanka, one of the most disadvantaged groups in Thailand has been among the early settlers into permanent quarters.

With money raised by Thai students, the Moken, a tribe of sea gypsies who had mostly lived in self-contained houseboats, have shifted into new homes on stilts, with thatched bamboo walls and insulated tin roofs outside Ban Nam Khem, a coastal town nearly obliterated by the giant waves.

"We're happy with the new homes," said Sewbee Leeskoon, 52. "The walls are nice, the roof is strong and we really like the balcony because you can see everyone now."

In an adjacent neighbourhood, another band of sea gypsies has begun moving into a new one-storey apartment complex with its own clinic, kindergarten and meeting hall.
Thailand’s ITV television network funded this project.

Indonesia, where the tsunami is feared to have killed 160,000 people, has yet to start building permanent homes.

At least a third of the nearly 600,000 displaced survivors are living in squalid tent camps. Another 60,000-70,000 are in military-style barracks.

The rest are staying with friends and relatives, where five months after the calamity they are wearing out their welcome and drifting into the camps.

Kuntoro Mangasubroto, chairman of Indonesia’s reconstruction agency, complained bitterly about how slow lawmakers and bureaucrats in Jakarta have been to allocate money for the recovery. “They have no sense of urgency,” he fumed in an interview with Reuters.

But Fasnacht at Service International said it's not all that unusual. The group, which has worked in Kosovo, also sent volunteers to Florida after four hurricanes hit the state in a matter of months last year.

"We're still struggling to get permits to build homes there," he said.

OUTSOURCING AID EFFORT

The Sri Lankan government is effectively outsourcing the recovery effort, leaving nearly $3 billion of pledged reconstruction aid in donor hands.

Its job is to provide the land, hand out permits and ensure building codes are met, said Mano Tittawella, chairman of the island's reconstruction agency, in an interview.

Carlo Ratti, a teacher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, may pose a challenge to Sri Lankan building codes with his design for a "tsunami safe(r) house.

MIT's SENSEable City Laboratory, in partnership with a Buddhist NGO, plans to build 1,000 of the houses, whose open design would not block the flow of water were another tsunami to hit.

Service International has put up 10 houses designed after a typical Sri Lankan village home and is building 10 more, after its local partner -- Voice of New Life Without Drugs -- managed to secure building permits from the provincial government.

They plan to keep doing that -- with different groups of volunteers who pay their own airfare, food and lodging -- for months.

"We eat the elephant one bite at a time," said Fasnacht, a father of four from St. Louis.

Nilmini, a mother of three, is one of 40,000 Sri Lankan tsunami survivors still in tent camps, down from a half-million just after the disaster.

She's hoping to get a cement block house and would be just as happy if it was far from the sea.

"I'm scared of the sea and my children are scared of the sea. They won't go near it," she said.

Various donors will build 55,000 houses for those like Nilmini, who lived by the beach. Rebuilding on the shore is now banned as a safeguard against any repeat tsunami.

Tittawella said he expects to have most of the displaced in permanent homes by early next year, although some experts think that this is too optimistic.

But Nilmini frets that after baking in her tent for so long, she will soon have to cope with a flooded camp now that the monsoon has started. Her husband, a barber before the calamity, is not working.

"I'm worried all the time and sad. I worry whether we'll ever get a permanent house." (Editing by Simon Gardner and Sanjeev Miglani; via Colombo Newsroom, +94-11-243-1187)