

WOMEN'S GROUPS - PRESS RELEASE

Women's Groups appeal for an inclusive framework for disaster response

A collective of women's rights groups who have conducted a series of fact-finding missions in the tsunami-affected areas over the past week wishes to bring to public attention serious issues concerning the safety and wellbeing of women which have not been addressed so far in relief efforts.

We appreciate the many public initiatives to collect and deliver relief and assist those affected by the tsunami in whatever ways are possible. However, our observations indicate that these efforts need to be refocused to ensure that those who have suffered as a consequence of the tsunami are not subjected to further violence and abuse by unscrupulous persons.

The heightened vulnerability of people in these areas due to the destruction of communication lines and the large scale mass displacement and death of people has created situations in which women and girls become more likely to encounter violence.

- In particular, we have received reports of incidents of rape, gang rape, molestation, and physical abuse of women and girls in the course of unsupervised rescue operations and while resident in temporary shelters, particularly in the south. Apart from these incidents (the number of which is not known), these reports have also indicated that women's mobility continues to be restricted due to the fear of sexual violence. No proper monitoring body has been set up to receive complaints, to take action against perpetrators, or to ensure the safety of women in these areas.
- We urge government authorities, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, in particular, to take note of these violations, and to take immediate measures to investigate such incidents. We also urge collaboration between state institutions and agencies such as UNHCR, OXFAM and other agencies working on gender-based violence in this matter. Provision of adequate security and establishing complaints mechanisms should be an urgent priority in the relief process.
- We are also concerned that the information flowing from the Tsunami-hit areas does not provide detailed accounts of the numbers of specific vulnerable communities such as pregnant women, lactating mothers, persons with physical and mental disabilities, persons with special medical needs and requiring daily and consistent medication. The collection of such data is absolutely critical for identifying priority needs in the days to come. In addition, accurate record of all those hospitalised after the tsunami should be given wide publicity.
- The lack of a system that could identify children separated from their families has also hampered efforts to locate families missing children or to resettle children with relatives in the locations where they were found. We strongly urge the National Child Protection Authority to work in coordination with the Department of Probation and Childcare Services to set up a mechanism to address this problem.
- As an initial step, measures should be taken to call on all those who know whereabouts of unaccompanied children to register them at the nearest Police Station or at the desk of the Department of Child Care and Probation Services at the Divisional Secretariat, and to give adequate publicity through the print and electronic media as to the present whereabouts of children.
- The role that the media can play in helping people to find missing persons and children should be systematised so that there is no duplication of efforts but rather a fruitful collaboration.
- The inadequate structures of coordination within the government bureaucracy at the level of Kachecheris and Divisional Secretariats is also a matter of grave concern. In view of the fact that government officers in local administration who were resident in the areas have also suffered personal loss during this time, it is imperative that the government seconds senior and middle-level government officials to take over administrative functions in the tsunami affected areas in order to ensure that these structures are able to function efficiently for relief efforts.
- Considering the enormous destruction to life and property, we urge the government to postpone the Advanced Level Examination and all university examinations.

Women's groups throughout the island are committed to extend their fullest support to both state and non-state structures that will work for the provision of immediate relief as well as for medium and long-term reconstruction and rehabilitation of all those people of Sri Lanka who have been affected by the tsunami in the framework of sustainable development and a lasting and just peace.

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS OF LANKA
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