

From the Region: UNIFEM Partners Share Their Stories

Stories from Sri Lanka:

Those of you who have visited Sri Lanka will not be able to take this devastation. Those of you who have enjoyed the coastal beaches will not be able to imagine that the atmosphere is gone.

I have of course lost a friend — a human rights lawyer, a former Member of Parliament, and a well-known peace activist. His family was coming out of their house situated on the coast of Hambanthota, one of the most beautiful areas in the South. He returned to retrieve some files on the shelf when the disaster struck. His wife and daughter were thrown up with the water and got stuck on a treetop.

A friend of ours, a prominent feminist activist, survived by climbing on to the rooftop of her house located in Batticaloa, in the East. She has lost everything once again. This is her second or third time of displacement. First, displaced from the North as a result of the war, then back in Colombo, now as things were working towards peace — Tsunami.

Our island has no early warning system of such natural disaster. Today *Tsunami* has become a household word. As the sea went in making a vast stretch visible, many had actually moved towards the sea to see this “miracle” and when the wave rushed back like there was no escape. We have never experienced such a thing. Even now we can only say in a whisper, “could the sea be so cruel,” as the symbol of the sea has always been very soothing and beautiful.

In the North and East, I have received information from colleagues from the Eastern Women’s United Front. They have been trying to provide cooked food for the displaced. Women in Kantalia have been trying to raise relief funds for thousands displaced in the Eastern Province.

Dear Friends,

Let me try to explain my experiences in some of the project locations, which have been badly damaged by the Tsunami tidal waves. We left from Colombo with stuff to be distributed among people who are displaced, and it took us nearly five hours to reach the location that normally takes only two and half hours.

When we entered into the village, we had to try hard to understand which is which, as there is no sign of any of the trees we are familiar with. Walking further down we came to the place where the Siyath office had been. Not a sign of any of the activities, which have been going in that building. All I could do was to sit on the fallen walls and to struggle with my own feelings since I have to stay strong, as the head of this organization.

The fisher family right next to the place of this office has been killed, and in this family they had three cute little children. Then we started looking for people as 95% of them were in camps.

Every person with whom we have spoken has told us about people they have lost.

When we entered a shelter, people started to scream at us and tell of their losses. I try not to cry, and at the end we ended up crying and sighing with them. We managed to visit 9 such places, and still we have not being able to locate some of the very active members of ours. People are not sure about anyone unless they have seen them personally. No one knows who is alive and who is not.

For the time being people are getting food and are basically ok. We distribute things that women need, such as underwear, sanitary napkins and other items. But all we had was enough only for two places. They kept on asking for these, since camps are public places and the women do not have a way to change their clothes, since all the donations are of dresses but no undergarments.

The women are in need of some kind of counseling to regenerate and to motivate them to face life. Women told me that they are so scared of going back as the insecurity is so high. For these people to get back to their income generation activities, the material or the machinery, such as yarn making machines, should be provided and maybe the raw material as well in the first round.

I know this is not only us but it is the whole region. Being there for each other will be the only consoling factor and the strength for the time being. I sincerely thank you for being there with us in this difficult situation.