

Tsunami: two years on...

It's two years since the tsunami hit South East Asia devastating coastal communities throughout and taking approximately 230,000 lives. Tourism Concern immediately became aware of the severity of the impact on the local communities affected, not just because of the loss of lives and homes, but in our report published last year we uncovered land evictions of coastal communities for tourism construction. In the largest aid effort ever where £400 million in donations came from the UK alone, we ask what happened to the tsunami victims and are they still suffering?

Jennie Dielemans, Ann Noon and Simon Forster report...

THAILAND

AFTER THE TSUNAMI, THE SITUATION BECAME MUCH WORSE FOR THE MANY MIGRANT BURMESE WORKERS IN the tourist region of Khao Lak, near Phuket in Thailand. Hundreds were working on construction sites at the time of the tsunami and no-one knows how many died. Many went into hiding in the nearby Lamru National Park afraid of being sent back to Burma. After the tsunami, there was a need for cheap employees. Some came freely from Burma to find work. But as employers are only allowed a certain number of workers, others were bought like slaves on the black market for approximately 4,000 baht (£58).

Now Khao Lak is trying to get tourists to return and the region has rebuilt itself with the help of the Burmese who live in camps which follow the new construction of hotels. However they frequently don't get their salary and, in one instance, 80 Burmese workers worked for six months before the hotel owner moved away without paying them. This is common but as the migrants are either illegal or don't have full citizenship rights, they can't protest. The workers should earn 200 baht (£2.90) a day but this can change drastically depending on the construction company and the hotel owner. There are several cases where Burmese have been beaten when trying to collect their salaries and they are often threatened at work. A couple of months after the tsunami, some Burmese workers met to get their wages but they disappeared and nobody knows what has happened to them.

The Burmese have no insurance and if they are injured on the job, they don't dare go to hospital for fear of being sent back to Burma. They don't go out after work because they're afraid of the police who have been known to take their ID papers. There are rumours that the police have been raping female workers. One international health charity states that it's almost impossible to help Burmese workers as they are so bound to their employers. One of their workers was attacked when he tried to intervene.

Jennie Dielemans

INDIA

TWO YEARS ON FROM THE DEVASTATION WREAKED BY THE TSUNAMI AND THERE ARE STILL WHOLE COMMUNITIES IN Tamil Nadu on India's east coast who remain in temporary shelters; shelters that have recently had to withstand heavy monsoon rains thus making living conditions even more difficult than they already are.

At the heart of the problem lie ongoing land disputes. M.A. Sekhar of the Tamil Nadu Coastal Panchayat Resource Centre feels that in some areas strategic evictions of fishing communities from prime beachfront land is taking place in the name of

... situation still critical

tourism. “We suspect this land is being kept for big hotels and private investors,” he said.

He mentions the village of Karikkattukuppam in Kancheepuram where 300 families are reduced to living on six acres of land compared to the sixteen acres they had previously because the government has said that the rest of the land is earmarked for tourism. In Kovalam, near Chennai, the building of new permanent houses promised by the authorities hasn't even begun yet.

Concerned that villagers may be unaware of their rights, the resource centre recently held a meeting of newly elected coastal representatives in Kancheepuram and Villapuram. The complex principles governing the Coastal Regulation Zones were explained at the meeting. “We are teaching them about their rights,” said Mr Sekhar. “Sea is their life and coast is their right.”

He goes on to explain that once people are aware of their rights, they can challenge the government in a court of law. He stresses that settling amicably is the villagers' main aim; they just want to be able to return to their old lives.

Participants at the meeting called upon the government to critically review existing tourism projects before proposing new ones. “The impact of the tsunami rehabilitation process,” sighed Mr Sekhar, “is worse than the tsunami itself.”

Ann Noon



Shahab Sahebi

Lid is a 10-year-old Burmese construction worker building hotels in Khao Lak, Thailand. His main job is to carry cement. A normal salary for a child is 160 baht a day (£2.25). But as with the older workers – they never know whether they will actually get paid.

ANDAMAN ISLANDS

WE FIRST FOCUSED ON THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS AFTER the tsunami highlighted plans to twin the Andamans, off the east coast of India, with Phuket in Thailand.

Plans to develop the relatively unspoilt Andamans into Phuket-style tourist resorts met with huge opposition. Local groups argued that this would have environmental and cultural impacts due to increased numbers of tourists as well as bringing disease to the many tribal peoples living on the islands.

Although these plans seem to have been put on the back burner, there are fears that resorts may be taking shape in more subtle ways. The Indian Government has recently developed plans to offer 15 of the archipelago's islands for auction, raising fears that the original plans for the new developments, intended to be environmentally sensitive, will be ignored in favour of economic gain. This looks rather like the Maldivian style of tourism.

Tourism Concern has joined a number of international organisations in voicing concerns over the development plans throughout the archipelago and are currently awaiting more details of the individual hotels and resorts in the new tourist development plan as well as the government's Environmental Impact Assessment which many fear will be biased towards the government's requirements. Other human rights organisations have shared fears for the future of the archipelago's indigenous communities.

Simon Forster