



# Tsunami Update: Sri Lanka

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Eighty percent of Sri Lanka's coastline was mauled by the December 26th tsunami, which inflicted great damage on life and property. The immediate international emergency response brought great hope. Unfortunately, today, with phase 1 of the recovery process complete, there is now political wrangling, poor communication and imperfect coordination. Still, survivors left homeless and currently living in temporary shelters with limited supplies may soon move into permanent settlements. Health epidemics have been avoided. And, in addition to the attractions of the unaffected interior open for tourism, the beaches are slowly returning to normal.

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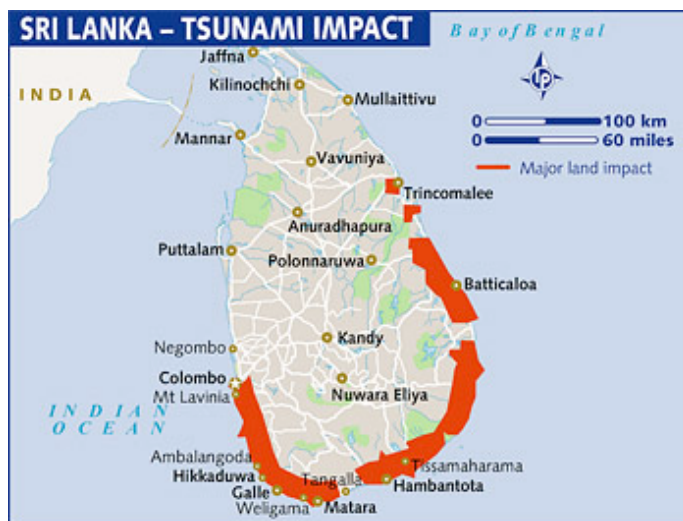
### Sri Lanka Recovery



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[Life is a Beach](#): The rewards of volunteering for beach and reef clean-up in Sri Lanka



## Recovery

In the weeks following the December 26th tsunami, hundreds of thousands of displaced and affected people were given immediate medical attention and emergency shelter, and provided with sufficient food, clean water, and even household items and cash compensation packages. The threat of disease outbreaks was quickly contained. Cleanup and repair work began on vital infrastructure, like roads and bridges, rails, hospitals and schools, as well as in many villages. And a variety of other clinics and services—document replacement, trauma counselling, work-for-hire temporary employment—helped those in need.

By April, after the universally praised emergency humanitarian relief effort had shifted into recovery mode, the sheen of met expectations had dulled.

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Today, while highly commendable work by more than 300 registered aid groups continues and the government labours to develop a clearer picture of the policies, principles, and laws that will govern the long-term recovery and rebuilding process, many of the people of Sri Lanka are frustrated. Divisive politics are on the rise, casting doubt on whether the government's forthcoming national reconstruction plan will be right for and consistent with the needs of the nation. Significant and inexplicable delays in many operations are common; some people are still living in tents with poor drainage, a marginal water supply and inadequate sanitation facilities, all of particular concern as annual monsoons and high-tide flooding begin. Worst, there is a perceived failure of communication and coordination between government and aid groups as well as within the aid community. Serious and sometimes government-fomented suspicions about aid agency financial malfeasance or religious charities conducting conversions have led to deep distrust.

Still, given the enormity of the crisis, the speed and scope of the response and the sheer number of actors involved, the successes have far outnumbered the missteps. Almost all survivors have been given and continue to receive food, shelter and medical assistance. Children are back in school. The construction of solid temporary and permanent lodging on officially allocated land has been picking up speed. There is even confidence that as soon as the government's national reconstruction plan is made public, full recovery operations will be set in motion.

This faith in the direction and planning of the recovery found solid footing in mid-May when, at a major international donor Development Conference held in Sri Lanka, vows of support were increased to nearly US\$3 billion (over a period of three to five years), twice the amount requested. Some of the pledges appeared to be conditional on improved coordination, and progress in the fragile three-year peace still holding after a 22-year war fought between the Sri Lankan government and separatist Tamil rebels (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam, or LTTE). Both antagonists are approaching agreement on an historic Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure, an administrative joint mechanism that will fell obstacles to recovery in the LTTE-controlled zones (read more about this in "Regional Summaries").

In a welcome shift of focus, with encouragement from former US President Bill Clinton, UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, some spending may now also go to non-tsunami projects with an eye toward greater equity. This dovetails with a government-proposed new framework for economic growth and poverty reduction.

Concurrent with all this high-level manoeuvring, a monumental amount of aid work continues throughout the country. In every affected district, a surprising number of agencies is active, including the United Nations (UN), major international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like Oxfam, World Vision, and Care International, and many smaller local groups.

The complexity of operations has been made somewhat more manageable by the division of work into several sectors. Most sectors have a national lead agency (often from the UN) helping to coordinate the field response to government decisions about work in the sector. Sometimes there is even a lead agency in the sector for the work in each district. The principal sectors include: food and nutrition, shelter and non-food items (NFIs), health, education, water and sanitation, livelihoods,

human rights and rule of law and infrastructure.

Although most of the projects underway are managed by these major NGOs with the participation of qualified experts in sector-specific work, some of them are in the hands of motivated volunteers. To learn more about these programs, see [How to Help](#).

### **Food and Nutrition**

In collaboration with local partners and the Sri Lankan Ministry of Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, the UN World Food Program (WFP) currently feeds about 910,000 survivors per month. This will continue until the end of June. At that time and through the end of September, WFP will expand its target group to include vulnerable groups from before the tsunami, like school children, mothers and infants.

### **Shelter and NFIs**

By mid-May, 25,000 temporary shelters were complete, with another 10,000 to 15,000 required. These will keep people protected from the elements until 90,000 permanent homes can be constructed, of which approximately 55,000 will be presented to displaced people who had been living within a highly controversial Coastal Conservation Zone. (For more about this contentious buffer zone—a no-new-development setback that runs the length of the tsunami-affected coast—see [Getting in the Zone](#)). Land has been allocated for 35,000 of these structures; more will be purchased from private sources for another 10,000. Ideally, everyone should have a solid roof overhead by March 2006. NFIs (towels, soap, buckets, cooking equipment, clothing) have been distributed to almost 500,000 people.

### **Health and Education**

The tsunami damaged or destroyed 184 schools and 94 health facilities. The government has signed agreements with donors and the aid community to rebuild and improve all of them, as well as renovate others used as camps and welfare centres by affected people. Meanwhile, special services benefit survivors, like UNICEF's school-in-a-box programme, which provided 200,000 children with lost learning supplies, and the Ministry of Health's Vitamin A Megadose Supplementation programme for children, which is answering an urgent health concern.

### **Water and Sanitation**

UNICEF has been leading the push throughout the country to provide new pipelines, pumps, water treatment plants, clean wells, toilets, urinals and bathroom facilities.

### **Livelihoods**

The Ministry of Labour and Employment has estimated that as many as 800,000 people lost their jobs due to the tsunami. Between one third and one half were involved in small-scale industries and small trade and businesses. Accordingly, the government and the aid community have established cash transfers (compensation schemes for lost livelihoods), temporary income-generating activities like "cash-for-work" programmes, and micro-finance initiatives to help rebuild businesses.

After an early drop in tourist numbers, major international promotional campaigns have helped boost arrivals and shored up one the island's main sources of income. After 2004's record number of arrivals—more than half a million—experts forecast a new record for 2006, especially if plans to

turn Sri Lanka into an up-market destination see light. (Read more about this in [Bouncing Back and Building Up](#).) Already in January of this year, even despite the tsunami, 32,000 visitors came to Sri Lanka, compared to nearly 50,000 from 2004.

The 18-million-dollar fishing industry, although devastated, is receiving redevelopment financial support commensurate with its importance. Marine fisheries once supplied 97% of Sri Lanka's fish. Then, although detailed estimates vary, the tsunami damaged more than 50% of the fishing fleet and all fisheries facilities in 80% of the fishing areas. It swept away approximately 7,500 fishermen and more than 100,000 jobs. Today, with many fishermen back on the water and supply and demand in full recovery, the government and its partners have earmarked US\$250 million to fully rebuild and re-provision the industry.

Similar attention has been provided to reconstruction in other affected livelihood areas, especially agriculture and cottage industries including those owned by widowed women.

#### **Human Rights and Rule of Law**

Oxfam has determined that, in some areas, four times more women than men were killed by the tsunami. Many children have been left with one or no parents. Critical concerns prompted by the gender imbalance (the need for women's participation at all levels of policymaking, but increased violence against women in new positions of responsibility) and the abused rights of orphaned children must be addressed, and are, through workshops, informational meetings and leaflets. Other vulnerable populations, legal protections, and family issues are being examined.

#### **Regional Summaries**

The tsunami did damage, in varying degrees, to 14 of Sri Lanka's 28 districts. These are: in the north, Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya; in the east, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara; in the south, Hambantota, Matara and Galle; and, in the west, Kalutara, Colombo, Gampaha and Puttalam.

Each district-very distinct from the others by virtue of the distribution and composition of its populations, quality of its infrastructure, and reliance on different economic factors-suffered in unique ways. This has been acknowledged as decision making responsibility is increasingly being devolved to district- and local-level government representatives and private- and public-sector actors.

Accordingly, many new initiatives are at last making a concerted effort to consult the affected communities themselves. Many appreciate that the government top-down approach cannot take into account regional or group-specific sensitivities (for fear of favouring one region or one group over another) and therefore does not allow for local feedback. In Sri Lanka, where the recent history of violence has tainted Sinhalese-Tamil-Muslim relations, such sensitivities cannot be overlooked, especially intercommunal affairs (whether citizens prefer to live in mono- or multiethnic communities), livelihood exigencies (whether fisherfolk or agriculturalists should live in the same areas), the strengths of cultural, caste, or religious affiliation, security and law enforcement and environmental awareness.

For foreign visitors, most of this will go unnoticed. Of concern to them is

that travel continues to be perfectly safe and comfortable in all unaffected parts of Sri Lanka. Across all affected coastal regions easily accessible to foreign visitors (thus, all but the LTTE-controlled zones in of some of the Jaffna and Vavuniya districts and all of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu), the following is generally true:

**Travel Conditions:**

- All tsunami-swamped coastal roads are today open and passable, although some, particularly in the east, are in terrible condition. Work is already underway to make short-term repairs, with ambitious medium and long-term plans for improvement. All bridges damaged or destroyed by the tsunami have been repaired or replaced.
- Full bus coverage of the island has been the norm for several months. Train service has been fully restored. Air traffic to Colombo's international airport, as well as traffic between its domestic runways (particularly between Colombo and Jaffna), is normal.

**Health Concerns:**

- While people remain in camps and welfare centres and debris continues to be cleared, health conditions, particularly as they pertain to infectious water- and insect-borne diseases, are carefully monitored. At present, although there have been cases of a variety of ailments and infections, no serious outbreaks have been reported.
- Although clean drinking water is being provided to displaced people, ground and well water salinity is still a major concern, as is pollution from poor sanitation, improper waste management and illegal dumping. Drinking local water, already discouraged, should be avoided.

**Availability of Services:**

- Only a small minority of hotels destroyed or damaged by the waves still remain completely closed. (See the downloadable updates to the Sri Lanka guidebook.) That said, with very few exceptions, every community open to travellers has some accommodation available. And, where there is a place to sleep, there is also a place to eat, either at the guesthouse, or in a restaurant or local eatery.
- Throughout the island, despite periodic outages or stock shortfalls, markets and shops are open, and electricity, water, gas, telephones (and thus Internet) and petrol stations are all operating.

Sri Lankans, particularly those employed in the tourism industry, are incredibly eager to see visitors return to the country. Anywhere you go, even to the many places where physical and emotional tsunami scars are grossly evident, you will be warmly received and are likely to be energetically assisted.

**Areas Not Affected**

The extensive interior of Sri Lanka was completely untouched by the tsunami. This area includes:

- the tea plantations and hill country - the cities of Kandy and Nuwara Eliya, and the smaller higher-elevation village stations like Belihul Oya, Haputale, Bandarawela, Ella and Badulla
- the ancient cities of the Cultural Triangle - Matale, Dambulla, Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and Kurunegala, as well as their surrounding areas
- the inland cities and parks of the foothills and plains south of the hill country - Ratnapura, Embilipitiya and Kataragama
- most of the city of Colombo and the west-coast beaches north of it - Negombo, Chilaw and Puttalam
- the city of Jaffna and inland portions of the district around it
- 16 of the 17 national parks (Yala being the exception)

Of the coastal districts, only the communities located on or near the shoreline suffered the direct effects of the floodwaters. However, the displacement of people has carried the indirect impact further inland.

### Counting The Toll

Government statistics from late April confirm the deaths of 31,229 people (almost one third of them children), injuries to 23,189, and 4,093 souls still missing. More than 250,000 families were affected and approximately 100,000 homes were either completely or partially destroyed.

In the days immediately following the disaster, a total of between 800,000 and one million people were displaced, about half of them into 315 emergency relief camps and centres. Today, approximately 500,000 individuals are still not in their own homes, the vast majority (more than 80%) living with relatives and friends. Of the remainder living in 263 camps and centres, the government hopes to see them housed by the end of June. Instrumental in getting people out of camps has been the push to build weather-worthy temporary shelter (as opposed to substandard lean-tos or tents) and permanent housing.

Initial dire predictions of economic collapse, especially as a result of devastation to the tourism and fishing industries, have proven baseless. Domestic and foreign resources were certainly already strained and some feared that the loss of economic infrastructure would be the final straw. In the end, growth in GDP in 2005 will probably be less than projected by only 1% since the sectors of the economy most affected represent a small portion of GDP. Hope for economic renewal has been bolstered by recent donor pledges that include grants and debt relief. Support for everything from poverty reduction to infrastructure redevelopment to propping up foreign exchange reserves will continue to sustain the economy and may actually put government balance sheets in the black.

### Country Overview by Ethan Gelber, Lonely Planet Author



#### About Ethan Gelber

Born in New York City, Ethan is a devoted sojourner (six continents well covered, often by bicycle) and co-author of Lonely Planet's *Cycling in Italy*. He currently lives with his fiancée in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where he is involved in many writing projects.

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