

Vaharai

Vaharai (also called Vakarai) is an area with large fertile fields, lagoons and virgin forests in the northern part of the Batticloa District on Sri Lanka's east coast. This was once a peaceful fishing village.

The human and property loss suffered has been extensive. The population was already impoverished by the two decade civil war and was barely recovering when the tsunami struck. There has been no electricity in this area for several years. Water comes from a well or river. There are no phones in this area. The already poor infrastructure has now been destroyed; for example the bridge linking the north with the east collapsed in the Tsunami, cutting off the Batticloa mainland and Vaharai.

Access has been by small boat until a Bailey bridge was built. The road conditions are tenuous, especially during heavy rains and a four wheel drive or tractor is necessary to travel to the village. The villagers are in a state of chronic malnutrition and many young children are unvaccinated or inadequately vaccinated.

The Tsunami created unbelievable shock, pain and devastation, with people losing family members and friends, their homes, all they owned and their livelihood. The Tsunami has also devastated Vaharai's one rich inland and coastal fishing industry.

There are over 19,000 people in the area, with another 2,500 in Vaharai North. There are 6 refugee camps in Vaharai where there are over 4,000 homeless survivors. Each of these families has lost friends and family, their homes and belongings, as well as their means of earning a living. Health facilities are very poor, with a toilet or two at most in each camp. Various aid agencies are working to build more toilets, and showers.

The people also live in fear and anxiety and are vulnerable to epidemics and malnutrition. Some camps are located on lower ground and are vulnerable to heavy rains and disease from poor sanitation and stagnant water. Some tents are lacking ground sheets. Water borne disease is a problem with cases of watery diarrhea and dysentery being identified. This area is also a breeding ground for mosquitoes, which brings the threat of Malaria. Crowding is a problem in some camps.

The prospect for rebuilding their lives is bleak.

The damage is more than material. Families feel forlorn and speak of desolation and despair; they are afraid to go back to sea. As most of these coastal families were fishermen they now need counselling to overcome their depression and fear of the sea, as well as help in rebuilding their homes and lives. Quiet desperation has set in and our donations of housing materials and essential goods can help them get back on their feet.

Several aid agencies and NGOs have been working in the area – Chinmaya Mission www.chinmayamission.org/centers/srilanka (Focussing on medical aid) NZ Aid, (sent by BD Heart), Oxfam, the Jesuit Relief Organisation and TRO amongst others.