

Tsunami: One Year On

**Speech Delivered by the Honourable Prime Minister,
Ratnasiri Wickremanayake**

**IPS workshop
December 1, 2005
BMICH, Committee Room A**

Members of the Head Table, Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to associate my self with this seminar to discuss the Report on “Post-Tsunami Recovery: Issues and Challenges in Sri Lanka” prepared by the Institute of Policy Studies. Reports of this nature and active debate based on their contents are items that our government fully encourage and take note of in formulating policies.

As the Prime Minister and Minister responsible for National Disaster Management, I assure you that the challenge of recovery from the tsunami disaster is at the top of the policy agenda of the new government headed by His Excellency the President, Mahinda Rajapakse. This is why one of the first steps of the government has been to set up a Ministry dedicated to the task of National Disaster Management.

Almost one year ago the devastating tsunami struck our shores. This was the greatest natural disaster in the known history of Sri Lanka, claiming over 35,000 lives and leaving tens of thousands more injured and homeless with an estimated 100,000 houses damaged and destroyed.

Communities living along the coast line, particularly the fishing communities were severely affected. While casualties were quite high in the South and South West of the country, the Eastern and Northern Provinces were the hardest hit. Two thirds of the deaths and 60 per cent of the initial displacement were in the Eastern and Northern Provinces. These are areas which had already suffered from many years of conflict and are some of the poorest regions of the country. More women died than men, and many women were left to cope with families that have lost the main bread winner. Roads and bridges were washed away, hospitals and schools were destroyed.

Bodies had to be buried and medical supplies distributed. Water and latrines had to be provided and debris cleared. Shelter had to be found and medical attention provided.

Despite the immensity of the task, the nation rose to the challenge, generously assisted by the international community.

Though we had never expected anything like this, after the first shock, the national response was immediate and effective. In the face of this national disaster, Sri Lankans buried their divisions and rediscovered their common humanity.

Individuals and communities, including public servants on the ground, were quick to take action, despite the injuries and losses many of them had suffered. Divisional Secretaries and Grama Niladharis were in the front line of the huge task of providing relief and assistance. The government took steps to organize and coordinate the massive relief effort.

We can all be proud of our relief efforts. But ensuring a successful relief effort was only the first phase of the national challenge.

The bigger and more difficult challenge is

- To achieve the long term recovery of the communities and the country,
- To rebuild the houses, schools, hospitals, roads and bridges,
- To assist affected people to get over the grief and trauma, and
- To make sure that we will never be caught unprepared in the face of any future natural disasters.

We have made much progress in the reconstruction effort.

People living in tents or similar temporary shelters have been moved into transitional shelters. The railway is operational, bridges and roads have been largely restored. Reconstruction is now underway for the nearly hundred health facilities damaged and the nearly two hundred damaged schools. In many cases, the new schools and health facilities will be considerably better than before.

But much still remains to be done in the difficult task of reconstruction.

In order to face the future challenges we must learn the lessons of the past. We must learn not only from our own experiences of the tsunami in Sri Lanka, but also from the broader international experience. We cannot predict what the next natural disaster will be. But if and when that occurs, we want to be prepared for it.

We want to look at what happened and what needs to be done in a critical but constructive manner. We are not afraid to admit to mistakes. The government appreciates an honest, constructive dialogue with all those who sincerely want to contribute to the huge national challenge that faces us.

We welcome today's report from the Institute of Policy Studies focusing on the socio-economic issues of recovery. The IPS has a history of providing independent inputs into the policy formulation process of the government. We thank the Asian Development Bank Institute for helping the IPS to prepare this report and provide an independent and specifically Sri Lankan perspective on the reconstruction issues.

This is an important contribution to the ongoing and much needed critical assessment and evaluation of our post-tsunami reconstruction effort. Our government has also been working with the donors and civil society organizations to prepare a one year review of tsunami progress and the way ahead. I recommend all of you to read these reports and contribute to the policy dialogue.

The government's approach is based on the following guiding principles. Firstly, the reconstruction must be carried out according to identified needs and local priorities. Reconstruction measures must be sensitive to the diversity of religions and cultures and the different needs of children, women and men.

The areas hit hardest by the tsunami have already suffered 20 years of conflict. Over 300,000 people have been displaced by the conflict and many of the families displaced as a result have been waiting decades for new houses. Many of you have stressed the importance of giving these conflict displaced people the same assistance as the

tsunami affected households. Last week, His Excellency the President in his policy statement to Parliament did exactly this. His Excellency outlined the highest priority given to rehabilitating the North and East of the country. He pledged that families displaced by the conflict will receive the same amount for rebuilding their houses as the tsunami affected households now receive.

Secondly, we seek to decentralise recovery activities to the maximum degree possible. The tsunami has highlighted the value of capable and honest local officials who live close to the people and know their needs. We want to develop their capacity further and give them the power to drive the reconstruction process.

Thirdly, we want to improve communication and transparency. People often do not know what is being decided in Colombo and this must change. Meetings must be conducted in languages that people understand. The government, donors and NGOs must be accountable to Parliament and the people for what they are doing with the tsunami funds.

Finally, we must all improve our consultation with affected communities and local stakeholders. We must listen to the people who suffered from the tsunami. They have made clear that their priorities are shelter and livelihoods – and this will be the focus of my address today.

Many people were and still are frightened to live too near the sea. There have been many false tsunami rumours over the last year that have created panic and forced people to re-live their trauma.

While many people would like to move a little back from the sea, they do not want to be too far away. But land near the coast is limited. The available land may be flooded or be in wild elephant areas or have environmental importance.

Local people who know the area need to be consulted more to identify appropriate sites for relocation.

We have amended the buffer zone rules in areas where land is on a higher elevation or where there are natural barriers such as reefs or sand dunes. But this must be done in a way that does not create further confusion for the affected

families. Ad hoc changes will create greater uncertainty. Affected families in areas where the buffer zone has been reduced will be offered the choice of rebuilding with a grant or getting a pre-built house.

Permanent houses are being pre-built for those whose houses were destroyed in the buffer zone. About 50,000 new houses are required. To build these permanent houses, the government realized that we needed to work with others given the enormity of the task. These houses are being built by NGOs and other donors. 25,000 houses are now under construction and donors have been found for another 5,000 houses. But we need to do much more and we are in the process of finding land for the balance 20,000 houses.

The government is providing funds to households outside the buffer zone to rebuild their own homes. This is being paid in installments as building progresses. Almost all the 50,000 families eligible have claimed their first installment for the rebuilding. But further grants have been claimed by much fewer families. We need to understand why further installments are not being processed.

Obviously rebuilding is affected by rising prices. Private land prices near the coast have increased many times. Sand, labour and other materials have gone up in price. We are providing sand from existing stock piles and looking into providing off shore sand deposits. Construction workers are being trained. As you have pointed out in the IPS Report, rising prices are inevitable when there is a major reconstruction effort. But it also poses difficult problems of macroeconomic management and fiscal balance.

There are also new challenges emerging in the housing programme. We need to carefully and transparently identify those who will receive the new houses. We need to work with donors to provide all the necessary infrastructure for the new housing schemes – water, power, access roads and so on. And we need to decide what kind of tenure system these new home owners will receive.

Our other key priority is to help people restore their livelihoods. About 200,000 people lost their main source of income following the tsunami. Over 20,000 boats have been repaired and replaced. Over 12,000 loans have been

disbursed to micro-entrepreneurs and small and medium scale businesses. Tourists are returning and we have launched major advertising campaigns to attract tourists.

But again we have faced difficulties. Many boats still need nets and engines. Sometimes people who were not been affected by the tsunami have got aid. Banks often have rules and requirements so that the poor cannot borrow. Some agricultural lands are still salt affected. Women have faced additional problems.

Many affected people were already living in poverty before the tsunami. How can we help them now to escape poverty? We must use the tsunami reconstruction as an opportunity to upgrade our fishery, micro-enterprise and tourism industries. I am pleased to note that these are issues you will discuss in your workshop this afternoon and tomorrow.

While we recover from the tsunami, we are also putting in place a framework for tackling any future disasters. The Department of Metereology has been appointed as the national focal point for tsunami warnings. We need to

implement the Disaster Management Act taking account of the recommendations of the Parliamentary Select Committee. Local and central agencies need to have appropriate plans in place.

Most important is to have an effective system for warning people of impending disaster. We can use traditional approaches such as bells and warnings from temples, mosques and churches. We must work with the mass media to send out clear consistent messages. And we need to explore more high tech approaches through mobile phones and other technologies.

The country has to face the tsunami reconstruction effort while facing a whole host of other economic challenges. We cannot treat the tsunami reconstruction activities in isolation from the broader challenges of economic growth and poverty reduction. You are all aware of the impact of the very high oil prices on our economy. I am pleased that the IPS Report has placed the tsunami reconstruction issues in the context of these broader macroeconomic problems.

Together we can solve these challenges and ensure that never again will the people of Sri Lanka be taken by surprise. I look forward to working with you all to learn from the experience of the last year and to go forward together.

I wish the deliberations of this conference during the next two days every success.

I thank you