

Peace Brings Little for the War-Disabled

By Amantha Perera

There are times when Thiyagarajah Santhirakumaran, 35, wishes that he had died in Sri Lanka's civil war. There is peace now, but with both his legs blown off by a shell he has little to look forward to except a life of dependency.

After surviving the crippling injuries in 2006, there was more in store for Santhirakumaran. He lived through the final stages of the war 2008-2009 when his native Mullaittivu district took the brunt of fighting between the Sri Lankan army and Tamil separatist militants.

"It was hell, there is no other word to describe it," Santhirakumaran told IPS. "When people are running to save their own lives, who would want to help a cripple?"

But, Santhirakumaran was carried to safety across a shallow lagoon by his wife and relatives.

Normalcy is slowly returning to this former war zone, and Santhirakumaran no longer has to fear that his wife and two children may fall to stray bullets. Beyond that, his life is bleak.

Unemployed and unable to get around in a region where public transport is a luxury and the concept of special access for the disabled almost unheard of, he spends most of his time in the ramshackle mud hut that he calls home.

"I don't go out and my wife supports the family. If I had a job, I would not feel so depressed," he said. "I can't do anything on my own, not even go to the toilet."

Santhirakumaran's case is not an isolated one. Thousands have been left disabled and helpless as a legacy of a war that raged on for decades.

An estimated 10-15 percent of the over 1.1 million population of the Northern Province is estimated to be physically handicapped, according to the Sri Lanka Foundation for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (SLFRD).

Most were disabled in the prime of their lives by injuries suffered during the war, Cyril Siriwardene, SLFRD secretary, told IPS.

"Even for an ordinary person it is a hard situation. The physical and mental strains of severe disability make it harder," Siriwardene told IPS.

Vellayan Subramaniam, president of the Organisation for Rehabilitation of the Handicapped, told IPS that in the conflict zone there was hardly any coping mechanism for those left disabled by the fighting.

While severely injured combatants were looked after, similar programmes for civilians were rare in areas that were controlled by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, he said.

"When someone is left disabled in his adult life, the rehabilitation programme has to take that into account. The inabilities take years to get used to," said Subramaniam, who was partially blinded in an accident in his twenties.

Experts working with people like Santhirakumaran told IPS that the disabled tend to be left on the margins of society.

"To break the psychological barrier (of acceptance) takes time," Ivan Rasiah, specialist with the humanitarian assistance project at United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Sri Lanka, said.

USAID recently donated 300,000 dollars for a pilot project that will help five grassroots organisations working with the disabled in the north. The project will initially train grassroots activists and in the second phase look at funding projects based on proposals.

SLFRD's Siriwardene agrees with the USAID official that creating social acceptance will go a long way in easing the burden of the disabled.

Siriwardene told IPS that most able-bodied Sri Lankans still view the disabled as being unable to take care of themselves. "This is a classic case of stigma working on both sides. Ordinary people have their misconceptions, but so do the disabled.

"It is a deep set value system that we have to change. We have to start small and work up, that is what experience in Sri Lanka has thought me," he said.

Organisations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Employees Federation of Ceylon (EFC) have launched programmes to provide vocational training and job placements for the disabled in the north.

In a region where unemployment is as high as 20 percent and under-employment – those earning less than one dollar a day – around 30 percent, finding suitable jobs is not easy.

"We have run similar programmes in other parts of the country and hopefully that experience will help us here," Ravi Peiris, executive director at EFC, said. The training programmes try to bring trainees and potential employers together at the end of each three-month session.

But even those who manage to secure some kind of employment feel disheartened when stigma invariably makes its ugly appearance.

"I have got a training post, but they want to check if I can do the job," says Perambalan Janakumar, who was offered a six-month training situation at a bank after attending the ILO/EFC training programme in November.

Janakumar told IPS that he felt that he was offered the post not because he was qualified for it but because he was left blinded by a shell attack.

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