



Families Finally Return Home in Sri Lanka



Mrs. Arandavarani in front of their new home
Photo: UNHCR/D. Fernando

Forced out many years ago as the military took over their land, more than 2,000 families are returning home and starting a new life.

With its bright blue imprinted doors and a creative touch that makes any house a home, the temporary shelter of Yogarasa Arandavarani stands out in Tellipalai, a small town in the Jaffna district of Sri Lanka. Her husband, a bricklayer, built the house, including its extra porch.

When they first returned home, all they found were ruins. **“It was a jungle with overgrown bushes and thick trees,”** she said. “It was very difficult to identify which plot was ours. My husband and I walked passed it the first time. All that remained was the foundation of our previous house, with one standing wall.”

The home was one of many in a high-security zone, areas that the Sri Lankan military established in the northern and eastern provinces during the country’s years of conflict. The Arandavaranis were “internally displaced persons,” people who fled the violence at home to live elsewhere in their country. A project largely funded by the UN Peacebuilding Fund aims to support more than 2,500 families, nearly 7,000 people, to return to the recently released land and start rebuilding their homes and their lives.

The \$1.2 million project supports peacebuilding opportunities created by the election of President Maithripala Sirisena in January 2015 and addresses grievances of minorities and vulnerable groups, including resettlement in the former high security zones. The project

aims to increase the trust of the formerly displaced communities in the government and the peacebuilding process.

“I’m happy with what we have now. After 25 years of moving around, having a place to call our own is a blessing,” Arandavarani said. Their three children are now working or studying.

But progress hasn’t been easy for the project. After the start in the summer of 2015, monsoons and a shortage of materials caused construction delays. At the start, families were somewhat reluctant to return due to the risk of mines and the absence of roads and basic services. However, as the project got underway and mine-risk education rolled out, and services such as basic sanitation facilities were put in place, families gradually returned.

“IT WAS A JUNGLE WITH OVERGROWN BUSHES AND THICK TREES”

As so often before, the PBF-funded project provided the impetus for others to follow. While UNICEF and UNHCR worked together in providing shelter, latrines, water supply and mine-risk education for the most vulnerable families, other UN agencies, development partners and non-governmental organizations also aligned their priorities to help the returning families.

WFP for example, mobilized critical and early funding support from the United States to provide food and cash-for-work programmes that supported land clearance, water tank repair, and clearance of access roads – important initiatives enabling com-



Mr. Puranalingam in front of the local temple.
Photo: © WFP/NguyenDuc Hoang

munities to return that were not included in the PBF grant. UNDP arranged support for basic livelihood assistance in the form of home gardening. Larger donors, development partners and the government will build on this initiative and provide support for permanent housing, etc.

Mr. Puranalingam, 64, and his family recently returned to his village, after a forced absence of 25 years. WFP helped him secure food for his family while he worked on clearing the road to a local temple that was abandoned for decades. "We can't forget the assistance that came at the right time when I had nothing to feed the family," he said.

In the end, it's about people and about providing them with a peaceful future. Helping people to return home is a means to an end, a way to bring back normalcy and re-establish long-term trust in a society broken by war.



Rajeshwari with her new born hatchlings
Photo: UNHCR/D. Fernando

Rajeshwari had just turned 20. She finally got what most of us take for granted: a roof over her head. After living her entire life in displacement, she was able to return to her family's land along with her parents. They received assistance to return. UNHCR built the transitional shelter.

"I was very happy," she said. "We came back to a jungle. Took us two months to clear, but knowing it belonged to us made it special..."

But the young woman is the sole breadwinner of the family. Without formal education or employable skills,

she makes less than \$2 a week with her five-chicken poultry farm. Her parents are both victims of the conflict. Her father was injured in a bombing. Her mother suffered a mental breakdown when they had to leave their home and lost everything.

Still, Rajeshwari is hopeful. "I have moved more than four times in my life and lived in many places. **Now that we have our own place, I feel free.** I can plan for more than a day at a time."

ABOUT PBF IN SRI LANKA

After more than 25 years of conflict in Sri Lanka, peace was established in May 2009. However, many conflict drivers and grievances remain and call for a broad reconciliation process among populations affected by the war. The current project is a part of PBF support to the Sri Lankan government, which is leading a policy towards peace and reconciliation.

PBF has committed an initial amount of \$3 million to projects supporting various peacebuilding initiatives: national consultations and technical assistance towards credible and effective transitional justice mechanisms (OHCHR); support to the Office of National Reconciliation (UNDP); capacity building for the Northern Provincial administration and Eastern Provincial administration to enable them to plan and deliver peace dividends to the population (UNDP); and immediate resettlement assistance to the most vulnerable of the returning families (UNHCR and UNICEF).

In November 2015, Sri Lanka was declared eligible to access the longer term funding of the PBF.

ABOUT THE UN PEACEBUILDING FUND

The Peacebuilding Fund has financed more than 400 projects in over 25 countries. Its funding provides United Nations and non-UN organizations with the tools to help sustain peace and prevent violent conflict. The PBF is risk-tolerant and innovative, can act quickly and works on behalf of the Secretary-General. Its funding often provides the impetus for others to follow suit.