

NEWS

Lack of aid worsened Sri Lanka crisis - MSF

THE withholding of government aid to trapped civilians in Sri Lanka contributed to one of the worst humanitarian emergencies of 2009, a medical group said.

Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) also pointed to a fall in funding for the treatment of diseases such as sleeping sickness and HIV/Aids as part of its annual list of worst humanitarian crises for 2009.

The organisation also pointed to Pakistan and Sudan as other countries where civilians were denied access to urgently needed humanitarian assistance, worsening the crisis.

"There is no question that civilians are increasingly victimised in conflicts and further cut off from lifesaving assistance, often deliberately," said Christophe Fournier, the MSF international council president.

"In places like Sri Lanka and Yemen, where armed conflicts raged in 2009, aid groups were either blocked from accessing those in need or forced out because they too came under fire. This unacceptable dynamic is becoming the norm."

In Sri Lanka, tens of thousands of civilians were trapped with no aid and limited medical care as government forces battled the Liberation Tigers with aid organisations banned from entering the conflict zone.

In some conflicts, hospitals themselves came under fire.

In what MSF described as a glaring case of abuse of humanitarian action for military gain, civilians who gathered with their children at MSF vaccination sites in North Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) came under attack by government forces.

Hospitals were also targeted in the Sri Lanka conflict, but as the MSF, along with other aid organisations were kicked out of the country by the Sri Lankan government, the organisation was unable to report on this.

An MSF surgical team worked since February 2009 in a hospital in Vavuniya and reported treating more than 400 patients for life-threatening conditions in just one 36-hour period on 21 April. In total, from February to the end of June, almost 4,000 war wounded had major surgical interventions in this hospital, MSF reported. The other referral hospitals in the region had also to cope with at least double, or triple, the number of patients they

had the capacity for, the agency said.

MSF said its teams were vaccinating thousands of children against measles at seven sites in territory controlled by Hutu militias when the Congolese army opened fire in October, despite security guarantees from all sides. Thousands were forced to flee, and MSF had to evacuate its teams to the regional capital, Goma.

"We feel we were used as bait," said Luis Encinas, head of MSF programmes in Central Africa. "The attack was an unacceptable abuse of humanitarian action to fulfill military objectives." The MSF vaccination campaign continued in other areas and reached a total of 165,000 children.

MSF also highlighted the less reported humanitarian emergencies caused by disease, which claim many more lives than war. It accused donor countries of jeopardising years of success in increasing treatment for people with HIV/Aids because of cuts or limits to funding in international programmes.

The neglect also extends to childhood malnutrition, a treatable condition that is the underlying cause of up to half of the annual 10 million preventable deaths of children under five each year.

"International assistance to fight malnutrition amounts to \$350m, while the World Bank estimates \$11.2bn is required to adequately combat the disease in 36 high burden countries," MSF said.

"Additionally, most food assistance is made up of costly and inefficient in-kind donations containing products of poor nutritional value that must be shipped overseas."

Sri Lanka was another country where malnutrition was reported, especially of the children confined in the internment camps in which those Tamils who fled the war zone in the last days of the conflict were being held.

Twenty-five percent of children in the camps in Vavuniya suffer from acute malnutrition while 40 percent of them are anaemic, said a separate report titled "Nutrition Among Post Conflict Displaced Children in Vavuniya".

The report in October last year further found that 41.9% of the children have diarrheal diseases and 17.2% are low weight babies.



Even though Tamil civilians are allowed to leave the camps, they continue to be deprived of essentials, leading to the sale of aid items like tents, mosquito nets and food to fund other needs

A market-based solution

The Economist

SQUATTING under an umbrella bearing an EU logo, a woman in a faded sari dips into her blue UNICEF bag and pulls out two towels, some toothbrushes and toothpaste, sanitary napkins and a small bottle of disinfectant.

She is soon ringed by hagglers wanting her paltry wares for even less than the pittance she asks.

Another woman clambers from a bus lugging a sack of flour donated by the World Food Programme. She jostles for space among the throngs of internally displaced Tamils peddling their rations near the hospital in Vavuniya in the north of Sri Lanka.

Just months ago, many of them were treated for injuries sustained in the war.

After the rout of the Tigers in May, nearly 300,000 Tamils who fled the fighting were fenced inside sprawling camps near Vavuniya. After concerted foreign pressure the government opened the

camps on December 1st. It was also swayed by the need for Tamil votes in the hotly contested presidential election to be held on January 26th.

Almost at once dozens of displaced civilians started taking their staple dry rations to town. They sell lentils, wheat-flour, par-boiled rice, curry powders, chick-peas and toiletries. There are mosquito nets and cloth nappies, tea, slippers and even a vegetable grater. Traders are arriving from other parts of the country.

Prices are at wholesale levels or below, and one says she had heard she could get things cheap for her grocery shop. Some of the poorer camp inmates make money from occasional odd jobs and manual labour. But there is too little work to go around.

So selling the rations seems the natural thing to do-not, one adds earnestly, that they are given too much. Rather, it is the only way to earn money to pay for other needs.

Vavuniya may soon lose its

pavement hawkers, however. President Mahinda Rajapaksa has promised to resettle all displaced civilians in their home villages by January 31st. U.L.M. Haldeen, of the Ministry of Resettlement, says hundreds of families have already been taken back to their villages and given tin roofing sheets, a cash grant and cooking utensils to help them rebuild their lives. He says only 101,113 of the 300,000 remain in camps, and denies allegations that the displaced are being quietly moved into other temporary housing, as the government flounders around in search of a coherent resettlement plan.

Many of the displaced show no interest in the election. One says he will vote, but only because it means he can visit his village. Another stares back blankly when asked if she knows the candidates. No idea, she says, distracted by a uniformed policeman who wants to buy a mosquito net. His small change matters more than the would-be presidents' promises.

IDPs 'resettled' to another camp

OVER two hundred internally displaced people (IDPs) had been relocated to a camp in Killinochchi instead of resettling in their homes, says one of the refugees who spoke to the BBC.

He told the BBC Sinhala Service, that they were taken from Vavunia to Killinochchi to be put in another camp. "We were brought here from the Arunachalam camp in Vavunia. They told us that we would be permanently resettled in our own homes," he told the BBC.

Tamil inmates from Vavunia say that they are frustrated about

the situation. "We had been here in this camp for over a month now. We were promised that we would be going home within days. Latest we heard is that it will happen in a month".

The refugee who spoke to the BBC from Killinochchi, said there are fifty two families in this camp situated at Killinochchi Central School.

"Once we arrived, we were given dry rations, now we get cooked food like any other camp. The perimeter of the school is guarded by the Army," he said.

"My house is only 800 metres

away from this camp. We are kept in the school while there is an army camp where my house was. This is a new camp established since the end of the war".

The refugees are not allowed out by the authorities, he says.

"After days of protest, they took us in a bus for a hair cut. The barber was only one hundred metres down the road. We were taken back to the camp immediately after the haircut".

The IDPs in Killinochchi are waiting to go back to their homes says the refugee who spoke to BBC Sandeshaya.