Kanyakumari, Dec. 19: After the tsunami, a threat as malignant as the waves were vicious.

Their lives crippled by last December’s killer waves, residents of Colachel, about 40 km from the country’s southernmost tip, are grappling with another malaise — cancer.

In this coastal stretch along the Arabian Sea, “noxious fumes” from the Indian Rare Earths (IRE) Limited plant, which mines and grades sand for atomic energy research, is as much a source of worry for local fishermen as the unpredictable sea.

In Periyavilai, a hamlet just outside the IRE plant, the air is heavy with a pungent smell. “Every year, three to four people on an average die of cancer in this village,” says Michael, a fisherman.

Few in this village are addicted to tobacco or related products like zarda, but “cancer of the mouth is quite common here though we have taken it up with the authorities”, says Michael.

“Even after the tsunami, two youngsters died of this type of cancer and we suspect it is because of inhaling the noxious fumes,” says another villager. Also, the hazardous waste from the IRE plant, they say, “is polluting the seawater and killing our fish”.

Just outside the IRE plant, the Kanyakumari Nadar Mahajana Samajam has put up a huge billboard. It lists how the villagers have been affected, the rising number of cancer deaths and protests the proposed expansion of the plant, which comes under the department of atomic energy.

The residents, whose lives are so inextricably linked to the sea that any alternative trade seems nearly impossible, feel any expansion would further jeopardise their livelihood. Father M. Stanley, the young parish priest in Colachel, echoes their fear.

“Even when they venture out into the sea, the catch is down,” he says, adding that less than two per cent of the fishermen have opted for other means of livelihood.

Stanley agrees with a recent report by Fritz Institute, a US-based independent organisation, which did a study on tsunami rehabilitation efforts. According to the study, a “significant proportion of the affected families in Kanyakumari (63 per cent) have been so deeply uprooted” by the tsunami that they reported that their lives would never “easily return” to normal.

Colachel alone had buried 414 of their dead and a memorial is coming up at the mass burial site there. It will be inaugurated on December 26, exactly a year after the killer sea struck.

The delay in constructing permanent houses “is also adding a great deal to our uncertainty”, says Rangaswamy of Sambasivapuram, where some now make coir rope to eke out a living.

“There is no proper cooking space in the temporary shelters. We cannot put our children to sleep. At night, they still cry out in fear of the sound of the waves,” says Arulseeli, a Dalit fisherwoman.

Sukumaran, a villager in Vettumadai, says he has not got a “single paisa” from the government because he could not include his and his wife’s names in the relief list in time.

Of the Rs 32,000 announced by the Tamil Nadu government for fishermen to replace their catamarans, “we received between Rs 3,000 and Rs 12,000 per catamaran”, says a fisherman in Periyavilai. “Nobody knows what happened to the rest.”

But there are voices of hope, too, and some are praying for a better Christmas this year.

One of them is Vijayakumar, a schoolteacher near Mela Manakkudi, where a temporary bridge across the Paazhaayar river to help people cross over to Kanyakumari town will be opened on December 23. “Fishing is yet to pick up because of the fear, but things otherwise are beginning to res-urrect,” he says.