

Speech at the conference on performance and preparedness “Lessons from tsunami” on December 15, 2005.

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I deem it a privilege to participate in this conference and share with you the State Government’s experience on coordination during the tsunami. It is now almost the year since tsunami tragedy struck Tamil Nadu coast causing death and devastation on an unprecedented scale. We seem to be using the term “unprecedented” very often these days. When we faced the unprecedented drought in the year 2002-03 who would have thought that we would have to tackle the tsunami disaster in 2004 and the unprecedented floods in 2005? The one lesson that comes out strongly from all these disasters is that nature cannot be taken for granted and that preparedness, as you have rightly pointed out in your recommendations, is key to effective relief.

2. I must compliment Fritz Institute for the extensive study on the dynamics of relief operations. We feel encouraged by your finding that the Government played a critical role in coordinating the rescue and relief efforts. We are happy that the affected families expressed satisfaction with the efforts put in by the district administration. At the same time we are also conscious that a lot of works remains to be done in the next two years. The tsunami reconstruction project funded by World Bank and the tsunami assistance project funded by Asian Development Bank have recently been started. They will pick up momentum in the next couple of months. Unfortunately the floods have diverted our attention since October. Once these projects are completed by March, 2008, there will be total transformation in the coastal areas. The affected families will have much better houses, disaster resistant buildings, schools which can be compared with the best in towns, better roads, new bridges and facilities like fish landing centres, fish processing units, drying yards, etc., that should certainly improve the quality of life of every one affected.

3. With the tsunami anniversary fast approaching, this is the ideal time to take stock of what has been done and what should our priorities be in the coming months. I will briefly give you an overview of the work done so far. For various relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities, the State Government have so far issued orders for more than Rs.1136 crores. Of these Rs.876 crores has been released and about Rs.630/- crores has been spent.

4. In the Housing Sector, detailed technical guidelines for both reconstruction and repair of houses have been given. Reconstruction is being taken up in two phases. In the first phase about 46,000 partially and fully damaged houses are being replaced with new disaster resistant houses costing Rs.1.5 lakh each over a plot area of 300 to 320 sq.ft. Construction activities have been started by NGOs for 32,207 houses of which 1564 have been completed. About 5000 houses are expected to be ready by the end of this month. The extent of land required for house building programme is 667 ha. of which Collectors have already taken possession of 485 ha. purchased at a cost of Rs.26.124 crores. The land cost is entirely borne by the Government. The habitations will have infrastructure facilities provided either by Government or by NGOs. 3957 houses have been repaired and another 3713 houses will be repaired before the end of the month. In addition about 2200 houses constructed by Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board are likely to be made available to the tsunami affected families in Chennai. In the second phase, construction of about 40,000 houses will be taken up for those whose houses are not damaged, but who are living within 200 m. from the high tide line. In the second phase, the entire construction will be done by Government.

5. In the Fisheries sector Rs.143 crores has been disbursed as relief. Replacement of boats, repair of boats, repair of engines, supply of nets, etc., have been completed. Fishing activities have been resumed in all the districts. The NGOs have also supplied a large number of boats and nets, with the result that the

total number of boats now is much larger than that existed before tsunami. New technologies in terms of steel boats have been incorporated. The department has taken massive steps to repair damaged fish landing centres, jetties, etc. sanctioned by the Government at a cost of Rs.7.18 crores.

6. As regards the agriculture sector, out of 8460 ha. affected by tsunami, all have been covered by the first level of treatment using gypsum, green manure, seeds, etc. The Agriculture Department has formed a number of tsunami farmers Self-help Groups to prepare the work plan for each field. The recent rains have helped the tsunami affected agricultural lands and it is hoped that the lands will be fully reclaimed much before the expected three years time. Similarly 670 ha. of horticultural lands have also been treated.

7. Restoration of livelihood is one of the priority areas. Rs.12 crores have been disbursed for providing livelihood assistance in terms of revolving fund and economic assistance under various schemes. 656 new SHGs have been formed with about 11800 members. The banks have also rescheduled loans given to SHG members in the affected families. Besides the directly affected people Government have also given assistance for the livelihood of a large number of families dependent on the coastal areas for whom sustenance packages were given till May 2005.

8. Psycho-social support has been given to 46,000 individuals in 14,000 families. Health workers, SHG members, community volunteers, retired teachers, members from NGOs, etc., are being trained to continue the counselling programme. The Government was very keen that students should get over the traumatic experience of the tsunami very quickly. While text books, note books and uniforms were given free of cost to the affected children, special examinations were also conducted. The results of the special examinations show that the percentage of pass of tsunami affected students is 79.38 in the Higher Secondary

examinations compared to the State level pass percentage of 76.9. In the X standard examination also the results were as impressive, with the tsunami affected students recording a pass percentage of 81.31% compared to State level pass percentage of 77.81. The State has also accepted to pay the tuition, special and examination fees for all the tsunami affected students till the end of the academic year 2005-06.

9. With regard to damaged infrastructure the respective departments have acted promptly to restore electricity, water supply, street lights, important roads, bridges, etc. For the long term reconstruction, projects worth Rs.166 crores under the World Bank aided project and Rs.561 crores under Asian Development Bank aided project have been cleared by the Empowered Committee of the State Government. The works are expected to be completed in two years' time. For training of masons and engineers in disaster resistant technologies a series of workshops and training programmes have been conducted and so far about 350 engineers from various NGOs and Government departments have been trained by a team of experts, trained from IIT, SERC and Government departments.

10. I don't want to go into greater detail for want of time. As I mentioned earlier, the achievements especially on the housing front would have been greater but for the unprecedented rains during this season. Some of the worst affected districts like Nagapattinam and Cuddalore have had torrential downpour affecting all sections of the people. Chennai has not experienced this much rainfall in the last hundred years. Naturally housing programme has suffered a set back. But, given the constraints, I must say that we have done very well so far. I would like to highlight a few factors which have been responsible for this success story. The first is that we have a strong leadership and whenever issues were posed before the political executive, the decisions came promptly. This matters a lot in a disaster situation. The State can also claim to have a very responsive and responsible

administration which rose to the occasion in a commendable manner. I am happy that I had the opportunity of coordinating and monitoring relief and rehabilitation work during this crisis. It is not always appreciated that the resources especially manpower at the disposal of Government are rather limited. The normal machinery is trained to perform the day-to-day responsibilities, but when a calamity of huge proportions strikes the State, it requires tremendous organizational capacity and commitment to mobilize resources and provide relief. The State Government was quick to provide money, men and material to the Collectors of affected districts so that they could carry out the relief work without waiting for Government orders. Another aspect which I would like to highlight is that Government encouraged NGO involvement from the beginning. Though there were some problems of coordination in the first week, these were quickly overcome and the Government agencies and the NGOs worked with greater understanding of each other's role in providing relief.

11. This conference is focusing on the lessons learnt from the tsunami. We are always on the learning curve and every disaster teaches us something new. The tsunami has taught us that there should be greater interaction between NGOs and Government. In the first week after the tsunami, as I mentioned just now, there was lack of coordination. This was because NGOs came in very large numbers and this was the first occasion when one came face to face with such a large number of NGOs working in different areas. With every passing day, there was greater understanding among Government staff of NGOs' concerns and interests and greater appreciation among the NGOs of Government's problems and efforts. If there is a permanent mechanism for NGO coordination, problems such as the one I mentioned can be avoided. The Tamil Nadu Tsunami Resource Centre which has been functioning as a joint initiative of the UNDP, Government of Tamil Nadu and the NGOs has provided a platform for information sharing among the Government,

NGOs, donors and the private sector. If this centre can be converted into a disaster resource centre that would give information on the work, areas of interest and specialization of various NGOs, it would be very useful. Secondly it has been our experience that NGOs offer to work in large numbers whenever there is an earthquake or a tsunami. The recent floods have caused extensive damage to the infrastructure. In terms of loss to the economy, it is as bad or even worse than the tsunami. But we don't find that many NGOs working in areas affected by other disasters like floods, droughts, landslide, etc. I would request NGOs to give serious thought to this matter. It is also our experience that NGOs like to work more in areas of relief and rehabilitation. Disaster prevention and preparedness are much more important and it will be a great help to the community if more NGOs start work in areas of prevention and preparedness.

12. Another lesson that we learnt from the tsunami is that identification of affected families should be done immediately after the disaster. We found that there was increasing demand from various pressure groups to provide assistance to more number of people. Some of these requests were justified and most of them were not. The only way to get over this problem is to take a census of the affected families and to give wide publicity to it within the first week of the disaster.

13. The tsunami tragedy has not only affected fishermen, but also a number of other categories like small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, big and small businessmen, petty traders, etc. Vulnerable groups like dalits were also affected. The various packages announced by the Government covered practically all sections of the affected population. In spite of this, there were allegations of discrimination against some group or the other. The Government provided sustenance package to more than 23,000 dalit families. In addition agriculturists and fishermen among the dalits have been provided with other types of assistance. It is our estimate that at least 10% of the total beneficiaries would be dalits. This being

the case, the allegations of discrimination are totally baseless and attempts to blow some minor issues here and there out of proportion are also unjustified.

14. The tsunami has also brought out the important role played by the media. By and large the media has played a very positive role in covering the disaster. The problems have been presented in a very sensitive manner and the coverage with a few exceptions have been very impartial.

15. As I mentioned in the beginning the most important lesson that we have learnt is the need to be always prepared. I am happy to point out that Government have taken a number of initiatives in the last couple of years to create awareness among people about the vulnerability of certain areas to natural disasters. We have given training to Government officials, NGOs, elected representatives at village and block levels and the common citizen on disaster preparedness. This training has proved very useful at the time of tsunami and again during recent floods. It will be our endeavour to continue this programme so that every citizen is sensitized about the need for better preparedness.

16. Before I conclude, I would like to congratulate Fritz Institute once again on the excellent study and for coming out with some very useful recommendations. I hope the views expressed by the eminent persons here will also be condensed and sent to us so that we can benefit by them. I would like to thank the organizers once again for giving me this opportunity to share my experiences.