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Survey assesses needs & delivery

SL largely depends on WFP to feed those returning to Vanni

By Shamindra Ferdinando

While parliament has been accused of wasting food in its subsidized restaurants, successive Sri Lankan governments continue to depend on World Food Program(WFP) to feed the poor segments of the population and the war displaced.

Although the country has been upgraded from a developing to a middle income nation and both politicians and officials are discussing grandiose plans to develop the country, the government is still struggling to provide a nutritious meal to needy children, particularly in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

In 2009 alone, 1.2 million Lankans had received food assistance from WFP, which in partnership with the government, provided mid-day meals to 350,000 school children.

The government had to secure WFP assistance to feed the displaced during the recent flash floods in the Western and parts of the Southern Provinces.

According to a recent survey conducted by the WFP in collaboration with the Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute and the Ministry of Nation Building and Estate Infrastructure Development, the vulnerability of the Vanni population to food insecurity remained very high at all resettlement sites.

The Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA) survey was carried out in Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Mannar districts in March covering those who returned to their villages from welfare camps.

Contrary to claims by some politicians, all those who returned from IDP centres had been receiving WFP food assistance under vulnerable group feeding (VGF) for a period of six months. Sources said that household food consumption was adequate across all resettlement sites and WFP ration was established to be the main sources of food aid granted. Such assistance comprised rice (83.3% of the total distributed), wheat flour (75.9%), lentils (88.5%), oil (73%) and sugar (50.6%).

Almost the entire Vanni population living in areas held by the LTTE was displaced by the time the Army crushed last resistance on the banks of the Nanthikadal lagoon last May. The government had to turn to the UN agency to feed these people despite having a running battle with the UN over allegations of war crimes.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa last week ordered that all war displaced should be resettled within the next three months.

The main objective of the EFSA was to assess the food security situation of those who returned to their home areas to decide on any future assistance needed. This assessment was regarded crucial in the light of planned return of the IDPs to areas of origin where access to livelihood resources could be restricted by land mines and UXO contamination.

Moreover most of the households had lost their homes, assets and other personal belongings during the displacement period and had nothing to return to.

WFP food assistance was planned for six months and there was uncertainty if the people who returned would be able to support themselves after this period.

According to the findings only 11% of the returnees were involved in food production during the last maha (2009/10) season. The bottom line is that the vast majority of households will not be able to feed themselves until the next maha harvest, and therefore would require further assistance.

Sources said that the government would have to take remedial measures to pave the way for them to resume farming. In this regard, a major task would be the supply of seed paddy to northern and eastern farmers, they said. Some of the major findings are:

Wage labour was the main livelihood for majority of households (35.6%) followed by farming (17.1%). Few households were involved in other livelihood activities such as fishing, skilled labour, trade, salaried employment and livestock husbandry; and 18.5% did not have any livelihood.

Opportunities for labour and the levels of earnings were found to be generally low. World Bank cash-for-work projects in collaboration with the government offered the most tangible opportunity; however, this was being undertaken (or planned) in few of the clusters and for a maximum of 50 days. At present, it has been increased to a maximum of up to 90 days.

More than half of the households did not have access to their paddy lands; 60% did not have access to highland crop fields; and 46% did not have access to their home garden land, mainly due to the risk of land mines and UXOs.

UN Mine Action database has registered 1,623 locations as known "dangerous areas" and 496 as "known minefields" in the Northern Province. However, their total surface area can only be determined after technical surveys have been completed in these areas.

At present, mine clearance agencies have engaged in clearance work only in the 10 % of task sites (173 task sites out of 1,818) and considered longer term tasks. Non-technical survey operations continue in the northern and eastern areas; expected completion of all Vanni Districts is December 2010.

About 51% of the households had land titles for their home gardens; 43% for paddy and 36% for their highland.

About 47% of households intend to farm during the 2010 yala season, but only if they are able to access seeds, irrigation water and other inputs in a timely manner in addition to improved access to their land. The 2010/11 maha season will be the first major cultivation season for majority households since resettlement.

Large herds of cattle (in hundreds) were observed roaming unattended. These were cattle abandoned by households at the time of their displacement and have not been reclaimed.

Some 10.9% of households in the sample were involved in fishing-related activities including ownership of fishing boat and serving as crew member in open sea or lagoon fishing vessels; as vendors; and in repair or sale of fishing gear/accessories (such as boats and fishing nets). Even though the ban on fishing has largely been lifted, most households lack boats and nets.

Shelter was one of the most immediate challenges faced by households and identified as a key priority by households, key informants, government and humanitarian agencies. Although 83% of the households reported living in their own dwelling, most of these shelters were of poor quality. Only 9.4% were of durable material; 54% were of non-durable materials; and 31% were tents or plastic sheeting.

School enrolment rate were found to be very high and averaged around 93%. Most school children in the clusters received note books and school bags.

Sanitation was not satisfactory, with about 47% of the households using open space as there are no toilet facilities. Only 14% of the households owned flush latrines with water; 31% owned pit latrines and 8% used communal latrines.

Nearly 17% of the households obtained their drinking water from unprotected wells. However, nearly half of the households have access to protected private or common wells and 3% had tap water supply for their households.

There were no major incidences of the common diseases. Only 5% of the households reported a member being affected by diarrhea; children under five and older persons were affected in similar proportion. This contrasts with the findings of MRI survey inside the IDP camps where prevalence was 42 percent in May 2010, and reduced to 7.6 percent in December 2009.

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