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Stories from the Field

Empowering Women to Rebuild Homes in the Conflict Affected Northern Province Ms. Caroline Nirmala, Iranapalai Village, Mullaitivu District



Caroline Nirmala with her parents and son, outside their new permanent home.

The “Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka through Housing” project is a housing recovery initiative supporting returning Internally Displaced Persons (IDP’s) in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Funded primarily through a Grant of € 11.8 million by the European Union (EU), it is built on the previous EU investment in reconstruction in housing through the North East Housing Reconstruction Programme (NEHRP) and the “Support to Conflict Affected People through Housing” project. Donor partners include the Australian Government and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Jointly implemented by UN-Habitat and SDC, the project provides cash grants and technical support to homeowners to reconstruct and repair their conflict damaged houses in the districts of Mullaitivu, Mannar and Killinochchi in the North and Batticaloa in the East. Mrs. Uthayarasa Caroline Nirmala is a project beneficiary from Iranapalai in Mullaitivu District who has constructed her damaged home with a cash grant from the project.

Thirty one year old Caroline was born in Iranapalai village in Puthukudiyrrupu DS Division. For the past five years, she has been living with a disability, having lost part of her left leg during the conflict. Caroline lives in her new house with her elderly parents and four year old son Anistan. Her husband, Uthayarasa, died in a road accident in Oddussudan several years ago, leaving Caroline the sole breadwinner of her small family unit.



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Caroline and Anistan near their temporary shelter.

Caroline’s family had been badly affected by the conflict, experiencing multiple displacements over several years. Their worst displacement was in early 2009, when they were compelled to leave their homes and travel to several locations in Mullaitivu District. During this time, Caroline sustained a serious injury to her left leg during a shell attack in Ananthapuram and received extensive treatment at the Vavuniya hospital. As her leg could not be saved, it had been amputated from the knee. While Caroline was receiving treatment in hospital and thereafter recuperating with relatives, her parents lived in Menik Farm Internally Displaced Persons Camp in Vavuniya District.

When the Government Resettlement Programme of IDP’s commenced, Caroline joined thousands of others to return to their villages. Puthukudiyrrupu DS Division, where Iranapalai village is located, was one of the last to be resettled, as the area needed to be cleared of Unexploded Ordinances (UXO’s). Returning home in January 2012, they found much of the village infrastructure and the majority of houses including their own, damaged beyond repair.

During this time, the family received assistance from the International Organisation for Migration to build a transitional shelter of about 200 square feet, with tin sheets and wooden planks. While Caroline and the family were happy to be back in their village, life in the temporary shelter was difficult due to lack of space, exacerbated by Caroline’s disability.

Before her displacement, Caroline had worked as a sewing machine operator in a garment factory. Since her return, Caroline started several livelihood activities to make ends meet. Caroline and her mother started a small poultry farm in their garden and also undertook weaving cadjan and sewing. While her income, about LKR.10,000 per month, earned from these activities was adequate for the family’s daily needs, it was insufficient to build a permanent home. Therefore, rebuilding a new home was a cherished but distant dream for the family.

With the commencement of the Post Conflict Recovery Programme in Iranapalai village, UN-Habitat conducted needs and damage assessments to identify families needing support to rebuild their homes. Caroline, as a person with a disability and a female head of household, was given priority in the selection process. Selected as a beneficiary in early 2013, she was provided a cash grant of LKR.550,000 in four instalments.



Australian High Commissioner, H.E. Robyn Mudie, meeting Caroline Nirmala in February 2013.

The Australian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, H.E. Robyn Mudie, during a field visit to Mullaitivu District in February 2013, visited Caroline’s house and laid the foundation stone to commence house construction.



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Caroline tending to her chickens.

As the project followed a “homeowner driven” process of reconstruction, Caroline was in charge of the construction process with technical support provided by UN-Habitat. She hired several skilled masons and two carpenters from the area to construct the house while her brother, who earns a living as a fisherman, provided his labour support for minor masonry work. The Iranapalai Village Rehabilitation Committee also helped Carolyn by volunteering their labour through “Shramadana” activities during the construction period. With the steady progress of the house construction work, Caroline received the remaining grant payments upon reaching the construction milestones. Having received the fourth and final payment in January 2014, Caroline completed the final finishing touches to the house including plastering and paint work.

Having moved to their new home in mid-2014, Caroline is now concentrating on her livelihood activities. Their new home is approx. 600 square feet with a living room, kitchen, two bedrooms and a toilet. Her living room is spacious and airy which is ideal for her sewing activities. Caroline’s sewing machine is given pride of place in their living room and she undertakes sewing orders for friends, family and neighbours.

While Caroline faced many challenges in constructing her home, she is proud of her achievement in building a permanent home which is benefiting her entire family, particularly her little son who is now attending the village preschool.

“This home has provided a safe haven for me and my son. I feel so much more secure in this house as it can be locked. This house is also much cooler than the temporary shelter and we feel very comfortable. I am grateful to the donors for giving us a cash grant to build this house.” Caroline stated.



Caroline sewing in her living room.

The Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka through Housing Project is being implemented from January 2013 to June 2015 in the districts of Killinochchi, Mullaitivu and Mannar in the North and Batticaloa in the East. The project will support the reconstruction of 4,600 houses and a number of infrastructure initiatives including 12 preschools, 14 community centres, 20 wells, and the rehabilitation of approximately 32 km of internal access roads.