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Stories from the field

Rebuilding Homes in Conflict Affected Mullaitivu District

Francis and Mary Natkunaraj Salaman, Iranapalai Village



Natkunaraj, Mary Jesintha and daughter in the veranda of their new home

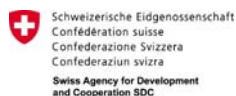
The “Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka through Housing” project is a recovery initiative providing support to returning Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Funded primarily through a Grant of € 11.8 million by the European Union (EU), it is built on the previous EU grants to assisting uprooted people through reconstruction such as the North East Housing Reconstruction Programme (NEHRP) and the “Support to Conflict Affected People through Housing” project. Additional donors 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.

Francis Natkunaraj Salaman and his wife Mary Jesintha are project beneficiaries from Iranapalai village in Puthukudirrupu DS Division in Mullaitivu District who recently completed reconstructing their damaged home with grant funding from the project.

41 year old Natkunaraj hails from Keerimali village in Jaffna. He had moved to Mullaitivu over thirty years ago, to avoid the prevailing conflict in Jaffna. Salaman’s wife, Mary Jesintha, was born in Iranapalai village. The couple married in 1996 and have three children, 16 year old daughter - Dilshika, and sons - 11 year old Dibanushan and 9 year old Dilakshian, who attend school in the village. Natkunaraj’s main income sources are from fishing and rice cultivation.

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Prior to the escalation of the conflict, he operated three fishing boats that also entailed employing youth from the village. However, in early 2009, Natkunaraj's family were compelled to join thousands of other families and evacuate their home during the final stages of the conflict. The family took the most essential items on this journey, leaving behind their cherished belongings, including Natkunaraj's fishing boats and equipment.

Puthukudiruppu DS division, one of the worst affected areas during the final stages of the conflict was one of the last to be resettled as it needed to be cleared of unexploded ordinances (UXOs) such as landmines. In September 2011, with the resettlement of families in the area, Natkunaraj and his family returned to Iranapalai village. They found their house, like many others, was damaged beyond repair and Natkunaraj's fishing boats and equipment destroyed. The boat engines that he had carefully buried in the garden for safe keeping were also missing.



The family outside the temporary shelter

As the family had no shelter and lacked financial resources to build a permanent home, they were assisted by several UN agencies such as UNHCR and IOM to construct temporary shelters as an interim measure. Their first shelter was made out of tent material. As the area had no electricity, Mary recalls that the family had to be extra vigilant when using oil lamps due to the dangers of causing an accidental fire.

Relentless in his spirit to overcome hurdles and recognising these dangers, Natkunaraj built a temporary shelter on his own with walls made out of cement blocks, and dried coconut leaves and a roof made out of tin sheets. However this temporary shelter did

not provide adequate protection for the family from the elements or snakes. During this time, Natkunaraj was unfortunately bitten by a venomous snake and received treatment at the hospital.

In early 2013, the family was selected by the project "Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka through Housing" to rebuild their damaged home through a housing grant of LKR. 550,000. As the project followed a "home owner driven process" of construction, Natkunaraj and Mary Jesintha were in charge of the construction process with technical support from UN-Habitat, an initiative that they took on with much enthusiasm. With the first instalment of Rs.100,000, the couple laid the foundations for the house. While the family contributed with their own labour towards house construction activities, they hired a mason and carpenter for all skilled construction work. The construction of the house took nine months and the family moved into their new home in March 2014. Their new house is approx.600 square feet, consisting of one bedroom, a shrine room, living room, kitchen and toilet. Following the completion of the main house, the couple have added a front veranda to the house which functions as the main area for social interaction.



Father and son checking the fishing nets

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In order to construct the additional features, the couple have supplemented the housing grant by using some of their own savings by pawning Mary’s jewellery.

Having received assistance from the Ministry of Fisheries, Natkunaraj has now resumed his fishing activities. However, he claims that nocturnal fishing activities by sea cucumber fishermen from other areas disrupts fishing and poses a major threat to his livelihood. The sea cucumber fishermen use powerful lights to harvest sea cucumbers, which results in fish moving to other areas. Natkunaraj, who had gone fishing recently with two others, had spent three days at sea, but returned home with a catch that was sufficient only for domestic consumption.

Having moved to their new house, Mary Jesintha and Natkunaraj are happy that the family is finally protected from the elements and that they are now able to lead normal lives. Natkunaraj said, “Having a permanent home of our own was always a dream for us. We never imagined that we would be able to make it a reality during such a short period. Now our children have enough space to sleep and study, and to keep their belongings safe. Most of all, they are now safe from bad weather. I really appreciate the UN-Habitat staff who supported us and motivated us to complete the house. I am grateful to the donors for helping me realise this otherwise distant dream”. The family is gradually returning to normal life. Their daughter had sat for her GCE Ordinary Level examination in December 2013. Although she had lost about two terms of school due to the displacement, she had been successful in catching up with the outstanding school work. She is now looking forward to commencing course work for her GCE Advanced Level classes.



Natkunaraj and his family outside the newly constructed permanent home.

The ‘Improving Living Conditions in Returnee Areas of Sri Lanka’ project contributes to a sustainable solution for the returnee families with the specific objective of improving the living conditions and social cohesion of displaced people, returnees and their host communities in the North and East. This is done through the facilitation of permanent housing and community infrastructure. Implemented in the districts of Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, Mannar and Batticaloa from 2013 – 2015, the project is assisting 4,350 families to reconstruct their houses through a “homeowner” driven process.
