

## Rebuilding Lives through Rebuilding Homes: Shelter Support to Conflict Affected Families in Northern Sri Lanka

### Gnanathurai and Gnanasakthi Ponnampalam, Paranthan, Killinochchi district



Sixty year old Gnanathurai Ponnampalam lost both his legs during the final stages of the conflict in the Northern Province. Returning to his village following the end of the conflict, Ponnampalam has successfully rebuilt his war damaged house and is now steadily reclaiming his disrupted life with his wife, Gnanashakthi and two children.

Ponnampalam and his family were supported in their re-construction efforts by the project “Shelter Support to Conflict Affected IDPs in the North of Sri Lanka” funded by the Australian Government. Following a “Home Owner Driven” process of construction, the project has supported 3,785 families in the districts of Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Killinochchi to rebuild and repair their war damaged homes during a period of 18 months. As the implementing agency, UN-HABITAT has provided vital technical support including assistance with house designs and type plans, guidance on the use of building materials and assistance in solving land tenure issues.

Gnanathurai Ponnampalam started his career as a truck driver at the Paranthan Chemical Corporation in 1977. From 1990 to 2008, he earned his living as a bus driver along the Colombo-Jaffna route. Ponnampalam and Gnanasakthi were married in September 1982 and continued to live in Paranthan where they had two children, son Gnanaselvan and daughter Gnanavathani.

In early 2009, the family were displaced as a result of the escalation of the conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka Armed Forces. Together with thousands of other families, they were compelled to move to Puthumathalan and Vattuvakal in the Mullaitivu district where the final stages of the conflict was in progress. In March 2009, the family was caught in the middle of a battle in Vattuvakal and Ponnampalam suffered serious injuries to both



his legs in a shell attack. He was evacuated to hospital in Colombo through military transport where he underwent emergency surgery. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the doctors, his legs could not be saved and were amputated below the thigh. Following a nine month stay in hospital, Ponnampalam returned to Vavuniya where he rejoined his family in the Vavuniya welfare camp for IDPs. In May 2010, having spent almost a year in the camp, the Gnanathurai family returned to Paranthan and commenced the rebuilding of their disrupted lives. As their house had been destroyed during the conflict, the family had no choice but to live in a makeshift shelter.

In mid 2010, the Gnanathurai family were selected as a beneficiary family by the project “Shelter Support to Conflict Affected IDPs in the North of Sri Lanka” to rebuild their damaged house, located in Paranthan on the A9 Highway. As the chief householder was disabled, the family was given priority assistance for permanent



shelter. A grant of Rs.325,000 (Approx.US\$ 2,900<sup>1</sup>), the Government stipulated amount for full reconstruction of the house, was provided in four instalments. The minimum standard required consisted of a 500 square foot house with a tiled roof, one lockable room and an external toilet.

During a period of 12 months, Ponnampalam worked tirelessly to complete the construction. He acted as the primary supervisor of the construction work and was responsible for coordinating with the builders and UN-HABITAT Technical Officers. The completed house consists of three bedrooms, a kitchen and an adapted outdoor toilet which has disabled

access. The house is built with concrete block walls, timber framed doors and windows and a clay-tiled roof. In addition to the grant provided by the project, Ponnampalam has used funds from his Employers' Provident Fund (EPF) towards the construction. He is now planning to build an extension to the house in the form of a front verandah with his savings.

Despite the many hardships endured during the 30 years of conflict, Ponnampalam is hopeful about the future. With the help of his family, he is cultivating vegetables in the two acre plot of land adjoining the house, earning about Rs.600 (US\$ 5) per day from the produce. The crops include onion, ground nuts, banana and chillies. Ponnampalam's two children assist the



parents with the agricultural activities during their free time. His son Gnanaselvan works as a trainee clerk in a private company while daughter Gnanavathani studies Business Administration at the Jaffna Academy.

Discussing the support provided towards the reconstruction of their home, Ponnampalam said: "If not for the assistance given to us by the Australian Government and UN-HABITAT we would not have been able to re-construct our house. We are particularly grateful that this assistance had been made possible due to funding provided by the Australian Government to help affected families like ours to rebuild damaged houses".



*Photos depict: 1 &2: Ponnampalam with his wife outside their newly constructed home: 3: The couple with their son – outside the temporary shelter. 4& 5: Ponnampalam*

*engaged in supervision of construction.*

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**For more information on the project, please contact:**

**Shelter Support to Conflict Affected IDPs in the North of Sri Lanka Project**

**UN HABITAT**

National Project Office

No: 23/2A, Independence Avenue, Colombo 7

Tel: + 94 (011) 2683704 Website: [www.unhabitat.lk](http://www.unhabitat.lk)

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<sup>1</sup> The amount in US\$ is based on the exchange rate during project implementation: 1 US\$ = 112 SLRS.