

## **M. Ben-Yami Column *WORLD FISHING*, February 2005**

### ***THIS TIME - LET'S DO IT RIGHT***

**This time I found it impossible to write about any other topic. Less than a month passed since the words "Tropical storms bring some of the world's worst disasters" were printed here in the December issue of *World Fishing*, describing America's recent hurricane series. The Nature's Terror, which stroke with the 9.0 deg. Richter-scale earthquake and the consequent tsunamis that ripped into beaches and raped coastal areas from Sumatra to East Africa, made other topic immaterial.**

**The enormity of the calamity is hard to perceive. The mega-waves swamped over thousands of kilometers of wide coastal stretches of the northern Sumatra, southern Thailand, the whole of Sri Lanka's eastern coastline, the three southeastern states of India and low-lying islands of the Maldives, Andaman, and Nicobar archipelagoes. They submerged villages, towns, ports and vast swathes of countryside, spreading death, misery and despair from Indonesia all the way to East Africa's coasts and islands.**

**As in the case of tropical storms, the share of fisherfolk in the total loss of life and property was by far larger than their proportion in these countries' populations. The survivors had to face not only massive death but also destruction of their homes, and loss of fishing boats, engines and fishing gear, their only means of making a living. Among the 11 countries affected, fisherfolk of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Maldives, India, and Thailand were the hardest hit. Many thousands of their fishing craft were lost, along with equipment and beach installations.**

***Calls for help.* First urgent calls for help came from those who've been on the spot and already have started to help the survivors. Herman Kumara, the Convener of the National Fisheries Solidarity of Sri Lanka (NAFSO), e-mailed his correspondents worldwide, while his team was working its way through the desolation: "Please help us urgently".**

**Pretty soon governments and NGOs from all over the world started collecting contributions and sending out assistance missions, while some people started thinking of things that must be done so that the survivors could keep going on in a world, which for them would never be the same.**

**"These communities have lost all their productive assets," said Fernanda Guerrieri, Chief of FAO's Emergency Operations Service. "Obviously the most pressing needs are for medical supplies, clean water, food, shelter and sanitation, but the affected communities need to restart productive activities as soon as possible so that they can feed themselves and to avoid mass migration of the displaced to already overpopulated cities."**

**Prof. John Kurien of India, a life-long fisherfolk's activist wrote in the *SAMUDRA News Alert* that, apart from bringing the fishing communities back into a functioning condition, future programs should provide them with safer housing farther off the beaches that in the Bay of Bengal are prone to natural disasters, install modern warning and rescue systems, and rehabilitate coastal vegetation for natural protection of the beaches and beyond.**

**The Tamil Nadu government wants to keep 85,000 survivors close to their respective fishing villages, and to help them with fishing equipment and housing. The government wants to accommodate them within a month in 150 "sheds", with toilets and community kitchens near by. This would enable them to stay at their home sites and start fishing. Houses will be repaired and new houses constructed. The budget, about US\$ 4,350,000, or US\$51 per survivor, doesn't seem over-ambitious.**

**The terror is now over, most of the dead have been buried or cremated, and what remains is the misery and destitution of the survivors, many of them fishing people without homes, boats and gear. Whole technical and commercial superstructures have been destroyed. In some areas, along with fisherfolk, the catastrophe killed also their clients and consumers.**

***Let's do it right.* No doubt, massive international aid will start coming in. High priority should be given to the recovery of the production capacity of the coastal fishing people who lost the bulk of their kattumarams (sailing or outboard-powered log-rafts), regular and outrigger-canoes, other traditional small wooden craft and also small, motorized fibre-glass fishing boats and launches. This is the sort of equipment that would serve best the surviving coastal fishing people. It can be inexpensively locally produced or repaired. It shouldn't be replaced with expensive fishing boats of foreign construction not tested for local conditions and with which local fishermen are not familiar.**

**A decades-old malady has been plaguing international and bi-lateral technical assistance. Donor countries have been converting a share of their aid obligations into equipment of their own making. In this way, all sorts of expensive "western" technology, inappropriate for local peoples and conditions, were being sent to developing countries. This has been very convenient for the donors, not many of which have followed the example of Denmark, which made it a matter of principle not to use its own products in its foreign assistance schemes. As a rule, such technical assistance was often coming at the expense of money that could've been spent more productively directly at the aid's destinations.**

**To avoid "white elephant"-type projects and be truly useful, the financial assistance should be aimed at local production infrastructure, local raw material, local boat and equipment makers, and nationally produced machinery for which technical support and ample spare parts supply are locally available.**

**On the other hand, also larger fishing vessels were damaged, sunk, or otherwise destroyed. Such, could probably be replaced by vessels of similar size and technology level originating from capacity reduction schemes in northern fishing countries. I'm aware of the rules and the lobbies that stand in the way of such procedure. Nonetheless, the enormity of the damage and the urgency of the needs should take precedence over routine thinking.**

**Fast and highly professional assessment of the needs should be performed. FAO Fisheries together with the fishery departments of the concerned countries and such regional international institutions as SEAFDEC seem to be best equipped to produce results that would be recognized and accepted by the various donors.**