

Kalmunai DS office under siege

Tsunami victims put up shelters within premises demanding permanent houses

By Poornima Weerasekara reporting from Kalmunai

More than 400 tsunami-affected families who were forced to vacate a refugee camp in Kamunai have now put up shelters within the Kalmunai divisional secretariat, preventing employees from entering the premises.

Some 410 families who have virtually taken over the divisional secretariat were earlier given shelter in a camp with the promise of giving them permanent shelter within six months. But the owner of the property had virtually thrown out the victims claiming he needed the land to put up shops.

The angry and desperate victims said President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Minister Ferial Ashraff had pledged to construct permanent houses for them in the Kalmunaikuddi area.

"We want a written assurance from the President or the minister that we will be given permanent houses," one of the refugees told the Daily Mirror.

The refugees claimed that Kalmunai Divisional Secretary A.H. Ansar had failed to provide them with a solution to the crisis when they met him last week.

"What is the point of having a government office which cannot serve the people," refugee community leader Bashir asked.

Top government officials including the Ampara DIG and Kalmunai ASP have visited the scene and appealed to the displaced families to vacate the premises.

The Kalmunai Divisional Secretary had also assured the refugees that houses would be constructed

within a couple of months. But the refugees insisted they needed a solid and genuine assurance.

The families who had also faxed a petition to President Rajapaksa are refusing to budge until a written assurance is given. They said there was neither a response nor an acknowledgement to the petition upto yesterday afternoon.

"This is a peaceful and non-violent protest after languishing in camps for more than one year. We even water the plants in the Divisional Secretariat premises, because we have no intention of damaging public property. All we want is for someone to take notice of our problem."

When asked whether the families have anywhere to reside after vacating the Divisional Secretariat premises they said that there was a 5 acre land that had already been filled in the Kalmunaikudy area.

"We pleaded with the divisional secretary to permit us to put up temporary shelters there but our pleas were turned down. That land was filled with rubble from our own old houses that were damaged by the Tsunami. Houses that were partially damaged were also completely demolished. Now they say we can't set foot on that land. Is this fair?", a refugee asked.

The families said several NGOs were willing to construct permanent houses for them, if land was provided by the government.

The victims lamented that their tsunami rations were also suspended and were not receiving the monthly allowance of Rs. 5,000 too.



Displaced families sleeping in temporary shelters put up within the divisional secretariat after being unceremoniously thrown out of the Kalmunai Tsunami camp. Pic By Kumara Dayawansa Nanneththi

President settles Kalmunai tsunami victims' housing issue

Pledges to construct 779 houses within 3 months

By Poornima Weerasekara and Navaratne Kumaratunga
(Kalmunai Correspondent)

President Mahinda Rajapaksayesterday pledged to construct 779 houses within 3 months for tsunami refugees still displaced due to the 65 m buffer zone declared in Kalmunai.

This decision was made after his 30 minute satellite video conferencing session with refugees who had forcefully entered and continued to occupy in the Kalmunai divisional secretariat premises for over a week.

"The President instructed us to construct 417 houses for the displaced families in Kalmunaikuddy and 362 families in Maradamunai," Kalmunai Divisional Secretary A.H. Ansar told the Daily Mirror.

The government has already filled 5 acres of paddy

land in Kalmunaikuddy at a cost of Rs. 60 million. A further 5 acres of land were identified to construct permanent houses.

The President also instructed the Presidential Secretary Lalith Weeratunga to transfer the necessary funds to acquire the land, to the Kalmunai divisional secretariat immediately.

A committee consisting of 3 representatives from the displaced families and 2 officials appointed by the President was setup to monitor the progress of the reconstruction effort. This team is scheduled to meet in Kalmunai today.

The President also instructed RADA officials to take the relevant land acquisition documentation to the Kalmunai division secretariat today.

However, according to the community leader of the tsunami refugees M. Bashir, the reason for the protracted delay in providing permanent housing was due to a title deed dispute, which prevented the government from claiming full ownership of the designated land.

"The government earlier bought this land, and started filling it without making the complete payment to its previous owner. Then he got a court order to halt further development," he said.

He also observed that the displaced families would vacate the divisional secretariat premises and find temporary shelter with their relatives or in the Peace Tsunami Camp in Kalmunai.

The Kalmunai divisional secretary told the Daily Mirror that formalities to pay the full amount to the

original land owners had begun. He also added a non-governmental organisation from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had already signed a memorandum of understanding with the Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA) to collaborate in the construction of these houses.

The Ampara GA Herath Abeyweera and Kalmunai Police ASP Jamaldeen were also present on the occasion.

According to the President and Chief Trustee of the Sainthamaruthu Jumma Grand Mosque Dr. M.I.M. Jameel, the Sainthamaruthu Divisional Secretary also was in the process of purchasing 50 acres of paddy land to construct permanent housing for tsunami displaced families in that area.