Self-help projects for IDPs in Puttalam

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The Peace Secretariat, in pursuing its mandate to coordinate the peace process, has sponsored a number of projects aimed specifically at uplifting the living conditions of women affected by the conflict. The latest in this series was a workshop for Puttalam IDPs held on May 16, 2009, by the South Asian Perspective Network Association (SAPNA) in association with SCOPP. Thirty educated young women from IDP camps in the area were selected to participate in the workshop.

An earlier project, also sponsored by SCOPP, involved providing assistance in micro-finance through state-owned banks. One hundred fifty women were given 50,000 rupees each to enable them to engage in small-scale livelihood projects. (Bank officials later said that recipients had been prompt in paying their instalments.) The leaders of the groups that received these loans were present at the workshop to share their experiences. The current workshop, held at the Norachcholai Aailnkuda Muslim Vidyalaya in Kalpitiya, sought to demonstrate the concept of “self help”, and in particular the utility of the Ranna Village model and its possible application in the Puttalam area. SAPNA had transformed the Ranna Village in the South of the country into a prosperous community. Mr. Wickremarachchi attached to SAPNA and three community leaders from the Ranna village explained the concept and the progress achieved by them to the participants. The Ranna Village model is based primarily on the idea of cutting out the middlemen and loan sharks who customarily sap much of the profits of small businesses, and of encouraging community organization where the owners of the small businesses pool their resources so as to meet each other's needs. The relevance of such a concept to the Puttalam context is obvious. IDPs displaced from the Wanni have been living in Puttalam for the past twenty years. There are an estimated 116,000 persons living in 121 IDP camps. They don’t have permanent residential or resettlement facilities, and live in temporary huts built on the ten perch blocks of land provided to them. Around 80% of the population is without a permanent source of livelihood, and eke out a hand to mouth existence through manual labour. Meanwhile, an entire generation has grown up in the camps. These children attend schools situated within the Puttalam Education Zone. Around 50% of the teachers attached to Puttalam schools are also from the camps. Despite this, a number of youngsters have demonstrated their innate resilience and talent by gaining entry to Universities while a few have even qualified as doctors. Life for the majority, however, remains one of extreme hardship. In short, the best way to escape this situation is still through individual and collective initiative, relying on one’s own creativity and ability to adopt to circumstances, and by making the best of whatever limited resources are available. Mr. Wickremarachchi explained through examples how the Puttalam IDPs, even though they lacked land, could model themselves along the lines of the Ranna village to secure their future. For instance, the participants were shown a film on a group of Nepalese women who had overcome all odds against them to achieve progress. The participants also learnt the value of forming Women’s Associations. They were informed of the instance where thirty young women of the Arafa Nagar Women’s Association, using their savings, built up a modest fund to provide loans to members. This triggered an intense discussion among the participants on how their own funds could be transformed into a bigger and more profitable fund. Coincidentally, each IDP camp has its own Women’s Association. A decision was therefore taken to bring together all of these Women’s Associations under an umbrella organization. Meanwhile, based on the success achieved by SCOPP through its concept of “Peace through Sports”, the participants also decided to promote youth activity and closer contacts among the IDP camps scattered throughout the Puttalam district by organizing a Sports Festival. The young ladies attending the Workshop agreed to cooperate in organizing the youth into groups similar to Women’s Associations. SAPNA agreed to extend their fullest cooperation to put into action the proposals put forward at the workshop and to find the required funds. Social Affairs Unit Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process Courtesy: SCOPP