
Model welfare project in the East

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One of the key tasks for the Peace Secretariat in the post-conflict era will be to encourage initiatives that bring disparate actors together. A recent collaboration to supply prosthetic limbs to disabled people in the Eastern Province has demonstrated that even simple welfare projects can be organised in a manner that promotes reconciliation. The Jaipur Foot Programme, administered by the Colombo Friend in Need Society, has been supporting disabled people across Sri Lanka for years. Last month, the Peace Secretariat helped to take its mobile clinic to Trincomalee, in partnership with the 22 Division Army headquarters, with funding from the Rotary Club of Capital City. Around 65 people from Trincomalee town and surrounding areas like Thambalagamuwa, Kuchchaweli, Kinniya and Nilaweli attended over three days. Of them, 40 people were given prosthetic limbs. A handful of serious cases were referred to the Colombo residential clinic and will be brought to Colombo soon. Another mobile clinic is to be held in Trincomalee town to serve a further 130 people, followed by similar efforts in Batticaloa, Ampara and the Northern Province. Most of the beneficiaries were fishermen, farmers and small traders, and many remarked that their new limb would improve their livelihood opportunities, helping them to work more and earn more for their families. Eight former soldiers received prosthetic limbs too. Despite the mobile clinic being held in a Buddhist temple, people of various ethnicities and religions attended, and everyone requiring a prosthetic limb received one without discrimination. Even former LTTE cadres were beneficiaries. The Army Civil Affairs Officer Col. Senarath Kohona said, 'Their past is irrelevant. They may have been with the LTTE before, but this is a humanitarian cause now.' This approach has characterised the Security Forces, who have fought ruthless enemies, but moved swiftly to relief work as soon as the danger was over, as in their guidance of so many of the weak and disabled who escaped the LTTE in recent days. The photograph shows the cross-section of people who attended the mobile clinic. On the left is Mr. Jibris, a Muslim fisherman from Kuchchaweli, who lost his limb in an LTTE pressure mine in 1994, at just 18 years of age. Next to him is V. Premachandran, a fisherman now, but a former LTTE cadre, who lost his limb in IPKF mortar fire in Sampalthivu in 1989, aged 19. On the right is a Sinhalese fish trader, Sarath Perera, who came from Galle to Trincomalee when he was 7 years of age. He speaks fluent Tamil, and communicated well with the other Tamil-speaking attendees. He lost his limb to an LTTE land mine when driving past an Army camp in Trincomalee. All three interacted very cordially, sharing their stories of how they lost their limbs, as well as discussing another topic that brought them together, their common livelihood of fishing. To ensure the effectiveness, accountability and transparency of the initiative, a follow-up meeting of all the partners was held. It reviewed the effectiveness of the mobile clinic, and formulated a strategy to ensure the continuity of the project. Moreover, the list of beneficiaries was passed on to the individuals who contributed to Rotary for the project. These donors could then visit and develop a relationship with the people they helped, and perhaps assist them in improving their livelihoods and the welfare of their families. The Peace Secretariat facilitated the project from conception onwards, while the Civil Affairs Unit at Trincomalee, led by Col. Kohona, helped to make the practical arrangements. It was remarkable to see these Army officers using a very different set of skills to those we saw them demonstrate on the battlefield. The Colombo Friend in Need Society conducted the mobile clinic, taking expert orthopaedic doctors, prosthetists and workshop staff, as well as materials and machinery to make custom-built prosthetic limbs for the people who attended. A total of Rs. 400,000 was donated by the Rotary Club of Capital City to fund the project. In bringing together such different groups of people to collaborate on welfare activities, the project serves as a model for others working in the conflict affected regions. The Peace Secretariat has been encouraging this kind of partnership approach in all fields. Economic Affairs Division Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process Courtesy: SCOPP