

LIFE 2 YEARS AFTER THE KILLER WAVE

The people of Peraliya do their best to ignore the empty homes and the memories of a once-tightly knit community

'Sometimes, it seems worse now than right after the tsunami ...'

BY TIM SULLIVAN
Peraliya, Sri Lanka

At nightfall, quiet descends quickly on the main street that runs through this seaside village.

On unpaved side roads, many windows remain dark. In house after newly built house scattered across Peraliya, no one is around to turn on the lights.

That is when it becomes clear just how much this village has lost: Not just from the tsunami that killed 249 villagers two years ago, but in the slow drain of villagers since.

"It's so quiet here now," says Sriyawathi Malani Gunathilaka, whose 19-year-old son was among the nearly 230,000 who died in a dozen countries when the tsunami roared in from the ocean on December 26, 2004. Officials say almost half of the 410 Peraliya families who survived have gone elsewhere.

"Sometimes, it seems worse now than right after the tsunami," says Gunathilaka (56), who lost her only son, Pradeep, and her home. But she plans to stay: "This village is my home."

Today, she and the other remaining villagers are fashioning a sort of normalcy, helped by hundreds of thou-

sands of dollars in donations.

They do their best to ignore the empty homes, and the memories of a once-tightly knit community.

So they are planting backyard gardens, weaving rope from coconut husks to sell, and taking sewing classes run by small charities. They're fishing in donated boats and sending their children to donor-built schools. Always, they're looking for more aid money.

“People who didn't have much before are now happy”

Every few weeks, Sriyawathi (56) takes a bus to the nearest city, Galle, where volunteers teach her about plant care and basic accounting so she can open a small flower nursery.

The work is her solace.

"Everyone around here, all they talk about is the tsunami, and that makes me think about my son. I can't do anything when I'm thinking about him," she says.

She and her husband have been slowly building a new home, a two-bedroom concrete cottage on reinforced pillars. The odds of another tsunami here are minuscule, but she'll live in nothing less.

"This house has to be strong," says Gunathilaka, the force in her voice an echo of the determined woman her neighbours once knew.

She suffered terribly after Pradeep's death.

"She's better now," says her older daughter, Kumudu (27), who lives nearby with her own small family. The younger daughter, Sujewa, is at nursing school in Colombo.

But Sriyawathi's pain is still there: "We're lonely," she says flatly, as her husband sits quietly beside her. He suffered a stroke some years before the tsunami and cannot work.

Peraliya is not an easy place to live. Competition for aid began dividing villagers soon after the tsunami, despite an outpouring of donations that meant everyone here got help.

Two years later, there's a bitter undertone to most conversations.

"When friends got together, they spend their time saying 'So-and-so got one house, so-and-so got two,' says Dalawatu-mulla Gamage Annula.

While basic post-tsunami payments were set by the government — 100,000 rupees (about \$7,000) per dead relative and 250,000 rupees for a destroyed home — the abundance of aid often led to chaos.

The trouble was magnified in Peraliya, a working-class



STILL MOM: Sriyawathi Malani Gunathilake fusses over her daughter, Kumudu Priyadarshani, by a construction site.

fishing village where the waves mangled a passing train and killed hundreds of passengers. The wreckage, a vivid image of the tsunami's toll, attracted gawkers, beggars and people looking to help.

While most aid groups tried to dole out resources carefully, Peraliya got everything from free sewing machines to tourists distributing cash.

There was also the chance of building extra homes.

"There are very few people from the village who don't have

a house now, and there are some families who have two," says Anura Abewardena, until recently the top local official. So many extra houses, he says, explain all the empty ones.

The biggest changes happened along the coast road, where dozens of fishing families had lived in now-destroyed shanties. Post-tsunami laws restricted rebuilding within 100m of the shoreline, forcing the construction of new inland communities for coastal folk.

But the shifting of so many

lives created opportunities for manipulation. According to Abewardena, many extended families who had shared one home got several, while others accepted homes inland, then persuaded aid groups to build second houses elsewhere.

Today, nearly every Peraliyian believes they were shortchanged.

"People who didn't have much before the tsunami are now happy," says Annula. Her husband, who died recently after a prolonged illness, had once been a successful fisherman, and they had raised their four sons in a comfortable house with a large yard. "People like me who were doing better, we only got the minimum like everyone else."

Few people, though, admit to being happy.

Sriyawathi is a Buddhist and believes her son, who was swept away as he tried to help an elderly woman, has been reborn into a new life.

Every night, she meditates and prays.

"I pray that he will never again have another death like that one," she says. — Sapa-AP



PLAYING ON: Two young tsunami survivors enjoy cricket on a beach close to Peraliya, about 65km south of the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo.



ALMOST HOME: Sriyawathi Gunathilaka, who lost her son and home in 2004, visits her partly built new house. PICTURES: GEMUNU AMARASINGHE