

Catholic Relief Services reconstruction nearing completion

With the passing of the third anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami that struck Christmas Day 2004, took the lives of an estimated 200,000 people and left millions more without homes, Catholic Relief Services President Ken Hackett reflects on the progress made in the region.

“The horror of that day remains seared on our collective memory,” said Mr. Hackett, a parishioner of St. Louis, Clarksville. “I traveled to Sri Lanka soon after the tsunami, and I remember driving along the road, seeing village after village completely leveled. I spoke with a man on what remained of his house – little more than a concrete slab. And in the rubble of what was his home, my eye settled on a clock on what remained of a wall, its hands forever frozen at 9:33 – when the waves came crashing through.”

Just as present are the memories of the international outpouring on behalf of the tsunami’s victims and survivors and how the CRS website crashed because of the overwhelming response of people clamoring to donate, he said.

“And once it was up again, how, over the course of several days, we began receiving \$1 million a day in web donations, where before we had received \$1 million a year,” the Baltimore-based CRS president said. “Just as moving were the heartfelt expressions of compassion on behalf of the tsunami’s victims and the stories we heard of the sacrifices people made to help their brothers and sisters on the other side of the world.”

Three years later, the solidarity of American Catholics has achieved a great deal, Mr. Hackett said.

In India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka – the three countries hardest hit by the tsunami – the work of reconstruction and rehabilitation (documented in detail at <https://tsunamiresponse.crs.org>) is in its final phases, he said.

“CRS and our partners have built nearly 9,500 permanent houses, with hundreds

more nearing completion,” Mr. Hackett said.

In India, the formation of more than 1,800 self-help groups has improved women’s access to jobs, health care and education through microfinance, and more than 800 communities have been trained in how to better prepare for natural disasters, he said.

CRS and its partners mounted dozens of infrastructure projects, which include reconstructed or restored roads, bridges, piers, markets, community centers, schools and clinics, Mr. Hackett said.

“In Sri Lanka, we have carried out our tsunami reconstruction amid the violence of civil war,” he said. “As we rebuild homes and communities, we are also providing assistance to people who have been displaced by the conflict.”

The CRS president recalled the words of a woman he met in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. “Marwani ‘Anik’ Halijah lost her home in the tsunami, but not her determination,” he said. “‘Nothing can steal my spirit,’ she said, ‘not even the tsunami.’ She went from being a tsunami survivor to a member of the CRS staff, helping her community recover and rebuild. Three years on, it is clear to me that the spirit of hope and resilience is alive and well.”