

Sri Lankan navy confiscates housing built by Jesuit agency

ROME — The Sri Lankan navy has confiscated permanent housing that a Jesuit aid agency had built for refugees affected by the country's civil war.

Families who had been living in 50 houses on the country's island of Mannar were forcibly removed recently "and the land has been taken over" by government forces, said Paul Newman, South Asia advocacy officer for Jesuit Refugee Service.

"All the houses have been completely vandalized by the (Sri Lankan) navy" and stripped of everything from the sheets on people's beds to the electric wiring, he told Catholic News Service March 5. Newman was in Rome attending meetings of JRS advocacy officers from around the world.

Government forces took over the land, saying the houses were too close to the sea, making them vulnerable to attack by rebels and crossfire in the event of a battle between rebels and troops based on the island, he said.

"But that is actually not true because (the government navy base) is quite far away" from the housing development, he said.

Newman visited the housing project last month and said, "It is a very sad picture to see these places abandoned like this."

JRS has no legal recourse to contest the takeover of the land and housing, he said.

"When it is a question of security there is an emergency and you cannot go against the security of the country, because that is the primary importance of the nation. And in the name of security they do these things and then we cannot really question that," he explained.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have been fighting the government for autonomy for ethnic Tamil areas in northern and eastern Sri Lanka since 1983. The conflict has left tens of thousands of people dead.

A failed cease-fire, mounting violence and a 2004 tsunami that killed 35,000 people in Sri Lanka have worsened the plight of refugees and “the common man,” Newman said.

After full-scale government-rebel fighting resumed in 2006, all of JRS’ projects for building permanent housing were scrapped, he said.

Money once earmarked for infrastructure now is being diverted to set up temporary emergency shelter to accommodate the constant flow of displaced people, he said.

Permanent housing projects were halted even though they were half-completed, he added, because if built they “would have been destroyed” by the military.

Newman said JRS’ main concerns now are “access to food and medicine for the people, multiple displacement, violations of all forms of human rights from arbitrary detention, killings, rape and torture.”

He said JRS staffers “work in very stressful conditions because they are always under the scrutiny of the armed forces who believe (nongovernmental organizations) are always taking the side of the militants.”

He said church-based NGOs “are always identified as being close to the militant movements” because “we work on both sides of the border, and we speak for the human rights of the Tamil” — an ethnic people whose oldest communities are in northeastern Sri Lanka and southern India.

“Anyone speaking for the human rights of the Tamils is identified as supporting the side of the militants,” he said.