

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

SRI LANKA

INTO THE CONFLICT: REACHING THOSE MOST IN NEED

It wasn't the approaching gunfire or even the exploding mortars that little Thasikan remembers as "being most scary" when his family was forced to flee their home last year. Rather, eight-year-old Thasikan says it was the look on his mother's face that made him cry. "There was a lot of fighting and yelling and people were running for cover," says Thasikan of the battle between Government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam around his home in Mannar, north-western Sri Lanka. "And then we had just an hour to take what we could and leave."

Thasikan's family lost almost everything – clothes, small water tank, and furniture – though it is the soil they miss most. "There we had paddy fields at our home," says Thasikan's mother, "but here ...". Her voice trails off into the bone-dry surrounding soil of her new home within a host community in Vavuniya, northern Sri Lanka. Plastic bags litter the dusty fields and none of the hundreds of families can grow so much as a small vegetable garden.

Sri Lanka's civil conflict is now almost 30 years old. It has claimed more than 80,000 lives, seen more than half a million people displaced, and resulted in hundreds of thousands of children having decreased access to basic services such as health, education and clean water. Said quickly, these are yet more sad statistics from a war zone. But behind each number is a child such as Thasikan, desperate for a better future, a safer future.

UNICEF's response is as broad as the challenges facing internally displaced persons. In education, UNICEF provides temporary learning shelters, distributes student and teacher educational and recreational kits. In water and sanitation, UNICEF ensures displaced and resettled people have access to safe water and sanitation through the construction of emergency toilets and tube wells, the distribution of hygiene kits and continuation of hygiene promotion activities. To safeguard the health of women and children, UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Health in strengthening routine immunization and antenatal care services, rehabilitating acute undernourished children through community- and facility-based therapeutic feeding, and distributing expectant mother kits, emergency health kits and nutritional supplements.

Thasikan is now back in school and has new books and friends. He still wants to go home, but says he "loves maths" and has "more time to study now that we have safe water [nearby]." However, as fighting intensifies, the number of children who are becoming displaced is growing. There are currently 200,000 new internally displaced persons in the north of the country, in addition to a huge number of families in need of assistance for resettlement in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. These families and their children will remain UNICEF's focus in 2009.

Together with work in health and nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, and education UNICEF's work in child protection is critical for children who have been displaced. Thasikan is one of the newest beneficiaries, as he will soon start in one of twenty Children's Clubs that UNICEF has set up in and around Vavuniya. Here, as with most of northern and eastern Sri Lanka, almost all children are affected by the conflict. Grenade attacks, claymore mine explosions and artillery fire are part of their life. To help children cope with this stress and associated trauma, UNICEF has set up Children's Clubs for children aged 4–17 years.

Hedged in-between barbed wire fencing and army bunkers, on the outskirts of Vavuniya is one such club. The children are divided into three groups – those setting up drama plays, those trying to hit cricket balls over the road, and those doing trainings for the youngest children. One such youth leader is 14-year-old Thushyanthi. Having recently participated in a workshop to train youth, Thushyanthi now passes on her knowledge. In a culture where girls tend to be silent members of the family, UNICEF's Children's Club has taught her to stand confidently in front of 30 children. She tells the boys to be quiet, and then launches into a session on supporting friends. "Children hear the fighting, they know there is fighting. This group shows that we can unite as children, come together, and talk about these things that scare us. We all have similar problems – we want good education, we want to be healthy, and we want to be free from conflict. Through drama, sport or just talking, we discuss these things here."

It is exactly where Thasikan needs to be.