

Sri Lanka film shows poor still suffer after tsunami

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By Andrew Hammond

DUBAI (Reuters) - Dhruv Dhawan just wanted to make a film about Sri Lankan survivors of the tsunami, but he stumbled upon a classic tale of how developing countries on the long march to prosperity often ride roughshod over the poor.

After the huge waves that crashed into southeast Asian countries last December, killing over 200,000 people, Sri Lanka banned rebuilding in a coastal buffer zone stretching 100 metres along the tsunami affected coastline.

Yet, as poor fishing communities were warned of more giant waves and promised new inland housing, tourist developers moved onto their land by the sea and Western tourists trickled back to the Goa-style beach developments sprouting up.

The government proclaimed that Sri Lanka had a chance to turn a disaster to good, by plunging much of its \$3.5 billion aid plan into gleaming new towns and transport links.

But Dhawan's "From Dust", shot in the southern towns of Galle and Koggala, suggests that the poor were just duped into vacating what in today's world is considered prime real estate.

"They were lied to and a lot of fear was instilled among them (of a new tsunami)," Dhawan said after the documentary was unveiled at the Dubai International Film Festival on Monday.

"We never really know, despite what governments tell you, what to take at face value," he added, estimating the number of homeless at 350,000 people, many of them languishing in tents.

In the film, Dhawan finds aid workers who recount how the authorities involved them in pulling down semi-standing homes rather than putting them back up whole again.

"We are not constructing a single home. (The government) is turning a crisis into an opportunity," a despondent U.S. Navy officer says.

If one million tourists visit Sri Lanka annually by 2010 and each one spends \$150 each per day, then tourism will become Sri Lanka's number one foreign exchange earner, they say in the film.

Approached by the film crew, a local politician from the Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP), seems non-plussed that the losers could be thousands of simple-living coastal dwellers. "They are small people," he says.

But "the small people" are the film's main characters. For generations they have lived as fishermen in formal communities around the Sri Lankan coast. Robbed by nature of family, they fear man is conspiring to rob them of their land too.

A distraught Australian aid-worker asks the men why they do not complain to the police about the hotel developers. "They think we are making money out of you," one tells the foreigner.

"This is how our government treats us," says Ravi, after reviewing an upland area where he has been given a vague promise of a plot of land to build on. "What have we gained since independence in 1948 (from Britain) -- nothing."

He recounts how he managed to save his mother's life after the tsunami with first-aid information he gleaned through the most unlikely of American TV shows. "My knowledge was enhanced by a television programme called 'Baywatch'," he explains matter-of-factly.

Dhawan, a resident of Dubai, says he was struck by the ability of the fishermen to suffer their repeated misfortunes. "This is about the" resilience of the human spirit," he said.