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TSUNAMI: CONGRESSMEN'S REPORT ON DISASTER ZONE

Pregnant Women in Tsunami Zone Desperately Need Help, Congressmen Say

By Emily Wilson

Jan 25—The 150,000 pregnant women in the area devastated by the Indian Ocean tsunami desperately need access to health care, according to U.S. Reps. Steve Israel and Joseph Crowley.

The congressmen, who recently returned from a fact-finding trip to Sri Lanka, said they are sending a letter to Condoleezza Rice, Secretary-Designate, asking for \$34 million dollars in aid for the expectant mothers.

Crowley (D- Elmhurst) and Israel (D- Huntington) said many of the medical facilities in Sri Lanka were destroyed by the tsunami and the women giving birth had to make do with the most primitive conditions. One woman they talked to, they said, said the only surgical instrument available during her labor and delivery was a pair of blunt scissors.

The congressmen say the organization best suited to help the expectant mothers is the United Nations Population Fund, which sponsored the trip. The Bush administration has withheld funding to the agency, saying it helps manage programs in China that force women to have abortions if they already have a child.

Sterling Scruggs, who is with the organization and went along on the Sri Lanka trip, says that's not true. He said the organization is working with the Chinese government on less coercive population-control measures and that it can't pull out of the country. "Preachers don't preach to the choir, they preach to sinners," Scruggs said, explaining why the organization is needed there.

Israel, who is on the House Armed Services Committee, said funding for maternal health care in the region is not only a human rights issue, but an issue of security for the United States.

"I spend a lot of my time thinking about who our enemies will be," Israel said. "One thing is absolutely clear — where there is [a] high infant mortality rate ... is where ideologies of militancy take root. Where people are vulnerable, they are exploitable."

The congressmen made their announcement at a press conference held at the Delhi Palace in Jackson Heights, a heavily Indian and South Asian neighborhood that is full of Indian restaurants and stores selling Indian jewelry and saris.

V.M. Gandhi, who owns a jewelry business in the neighborhood, said the United States government should be doing more to help the tsunami-scarred region, and that even if the administration does release money to the UN Population Fund, it won't go far enough.

"Thirty-four million dollars is a drop in the ocean," he said.

Crowley, who represents the second largest community of South Asians in the United States, said he wanted to visit Sri Lanka to survey relief efforts.

"I wanted to see first hand what it is like there for the most vulnerable - the women and children," Crowley said. "We touched it, we saw it, we smelled it."

Shiv Dass, the president of the Jackson Heights Merchants' Association, said he appreciates the attention of elected officials to the region.

"They saw the tragedy," he said. "They saw the babies crying. They saw the jobs lost and the boats ruined."

Dass, whose organization has raised \$20,000 and hopes to raise \$10,000 more to adopt orphans in India and help fishermen get back on the ocean, said he is hopeful that the Bush administration will give the funds to the United Nations Population Fund.

"If we release \$34 million that will help," he said. "It will help and it will happen."