



PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN FROM MYANMAR

Sri Lanka Red Cross Society

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Sri Lanka Red Cross and IFRC personnel delivering services as part of DREF operation that included Unaccompanied and Separated Children
Photo credit: Sri Lanka Red Cross Society

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Background

On December 18, 2022, the Sri Lanka Navy rescued 105 distressed migrants from Rakhine State of Myanmar on a stranded boat that was reported to have trespassed into Sri Lanka's northern territorial waters following a mechanical failure.

This group of migrants included 49 children (21 girls and 28 boys), including 19 unaccompanied children (12 boys and 7 girls) ranging in age from 10-17 years.

Since their arrival, the government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have coordinated with a number of partners to provide humanitarian assistance. The Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS), the country's largest humanitarian organization, joined the operation as an auxiliary organization to the government, assisting the government authorities in providing essential humanitarian assistance and services. This included shelter assistance, relief items, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), health services, and Protection, Gender, and Inclusion (PGI) services to the rescued migrants through a four-month Population Movement Operation funded by the IFRC's Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF).

Though the SLRCS has a long history and extensive experience responding to a wide variety of human-made and natural disasters, this was the first ever population movement operation of the organization, which was carried out in collaboration with other key stakeholders working in Sri Lanka

Who was Supported and How

Through a partnership with the IFRC, applying DREF funds, SLRCS was able to take a number of actions to support the unaccompanied children. In particular:

- Restoring Family Links including through Tracing and international phone calls with family
- Cash and voucher assistance for daily needs
- Hygiene kits
- Bicycles for transportation
- Language training in partnership with local partner, Muslim Aid
- Medical camps to provide healthcare services, especially as children had a number of health concerns after their journey
- Support with school packs and access to local schools (once language training completed)
- Delivery of recreational materials to facilitate activities like drawing, writing, painting, etc. And establishing the necessary coordination with local leaders to ensure that children had access to the playground and local facilities, allowing them to engage in quality recreational activities

Successes

The SLRCS response led to a number of successes.

- Providing a variety of assistance, based on assessments with children and in consultation with partners, to all of the unaccompanied children during the DREF and continuing afterwards. Currently SLRCS is implementing a 2-year plan for additional support focusing on education needs.
- Supporting integration of the unaccompanied children in a safe location for two years and then also assisting in the reintegration with the other migrants once children reach adulthood.
- Partnering with Government of Sri Lanka Ministries such as for Immigration and Child Care and Probation. Also partnering with NGOs and UNHCR, ECHO, and governments embassies such as the Government of Switzerland.
- Forty-nine SLRCS volunteers underwent training on PGI. The information obtained from the needs assessment regarding age, gender, and disability enabled SLRCS to effectively address the needs of these specific populations by ensuring adequate coverage that considers their vulnerabilities.

Challenges and Difficulties

There were several challenges SLRCS experienced in its assistance to unaccompanied children.

- Children had many needs and needed intensive support because they did not have their parents or other adults to help them navigate.
- Learning local languages was difficult for the children and has taken time and investment to support. The lack of being able to communicate in English, Sinhalese, or Tamil created barriers in accessing education and other services, in addition to making the children feel more socially isolated.
- A number of children were resistant to some of the services mainly due to fear of exclusion from authorities and due to challenges in integrating into a new environment especially without knowledge of the culture or local languages.

Lessons Learned

1. Protection and assistance support to unaccompanied children has been an **ongoing process**. SLRCS continues to assist the children and has a 2-year plan to further this work, especially around access to education and livelihoods.
2. **2. Developing partnerships and effective coordination** with stakeholders has enhanced the quality and effectiveness of the assistance. In particular, partnerships and coordination with government ministries, UNHCR, Muslim Aid, ECHO, local embassies, and Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement partners. The partnerships have also helped to sustain action to support the unaccompanied children. This has been strengthened through outreach on Red Cross and Red Crescent Fundamental Principles and its migration policies and strategies.
3. **3. Providing cash and voucher assistance**, in partnership with local grocery stores, has allowed for unaccompanied children to feel empowered through making decisions on their personal needs and optimized flexibility.
4. **4. Prioritizing support to learn local languages** can accelerate the integration, reduce isolation, and strengthen success at school for unaccompanied children.
5. **5. Standard Operating Procedures** are needed for multi-sectoral responses and these should clearly include actions to protect and assist UASC.
6. **6. Building capacity and experience of volunteers** at local branches so they can respond to areas that are new to them and so they can effectively meet standards.