

15 July 2010 Sri Lanka – Thousands of schoolchildren in Ampara district, eastern Sri Lanka, recently cheered in a new era in education, with marching bands playing and UNICEF flags waving during official ceremonies in their villages.

Along with local community leaders, they were celebrating the opening of six new schools – the result of a UNICEF Sri Lanka investment totalling \$3.8 million. Thousands of students will benefit from the UNICEF-funded schools.

But it was a solemn moment, too – a moment to remember the tsunami that destroyed their old schools and villages in December 2004. The scars of the tsunami are still scattered along the coastline here, tombstones and ruins from the time when the sea took the lives of more than 30,000 Sri Lankans.

'Building back better'

The new, state-of-the-art schools are part of a 'building back better' project that has breathed new life into Ampara's communities. Although the double blow of the tsunami and recent conflict in Sri Lanka has left people reeling, many are looking forward to a brighter future.

As one student noted, "We are living peacefully now."

Signs of renewal and rebuilding are everywhere. New water wells have been dug, pupils are enjoying learning in their new schools, and landmines are being cleared. In some cases, former battlegrounds are now playgrounds.

From their modern school buildings, excited young boys and girls survey their past, recalling the tin-shack classrooms they once attended.

"For us, it was very important to make sure that children in remote places and from very poor communities also regain access to education," said UNICEF Representative in Sri Lanka Philippe Duamelle.

A protective environment

The six new schools form a ribbon along Sri Lanka's eastern coast. They are located in the villages of Thirukovil, Sinnamugatuvaram, Kalmunai, Santhamaruthu, Maruthamuni and Kalmunaikudy.

Each school has been built to 'child-friendly' specifications. Child-friendly schools provide safe, healthy and protective educational environments with trained teachers, adequate resources and appropriate physical and emotional conditions to foster learning. Within them, children's rights are protected and their voices heard.

This means the Ampara schools feature high-quality construction, separate toilets for boys and

girls, handwashing facilities, and access for children with special needs. UNICEF's investment in the schools also includes providing furniture and learning materials.

The schools are part of UNICEF's support for Sri Lanka in the continuing effort to ensure that every child's right to a quality education is fulfilled, irrespective of his or her circumstances.

Source: UNICEF