

Geo and Toni in Sri Lanka - September 07 Newsletter

Tsunami Scare

About two weeks ago we had a tsunami warning. A large earthquake struck the Indonesia coast and information regarding the possibility of a tsunami spread throughout the area including Sri Lanka. As a precaution, people living on or near beach areas were asked to evacuate to higher ground. This warning created a panic as people who were blocks away from the beach also decided to move inland. Roads were filled with people; some of whom were carrying their valuables in large bags or wheelbarrows. As our office is but a couple of blocks from the beach, our elderly neighbours were also in a panic as telephone lines were overloaded and they could not reach family members for assistance. The 2004 tsunami wave had not reached the office so we decided to stay put rather than fight the crowds on Galle Road. Needless to say they were relieved when the all clear came a few hours later. It was good to know that the new warning systems were working but it also revived vivid memories of the Boxing Day Tsunami.

October is monsoon month in Sri Lanka and the heavy rains that cause flooding of agricultural lands and homes are created to a large degree by deforestation and pollution. Sri Lanka is beginning to recognize the dangers of clearing jungle slopes as it has led to serious erosion problems. Destroying Mangrove trees has resulted in the erosion of beaches and riverbanks as well as fish breeding places. Garbage is often left on the streets and is responsible for blocking the cement drains that carry the grey water from households and factories. Heavy rains can therefore create flood situations in towns and cities. In recognition of this problem the government instead of improving garbage collection has banned the sale of very thin plastic but this has only led to the use of heavier plastics.

Angulana

Construction of new homes is well underway for 80 of the Angulana families and they hope to be in their new homes by the end of October. The group of 23 families who purchased tiny 6 'perch' plots are still waiting for final government approval re water and

roads so they can begin to build their homes – the wheels of both government and NGOs can move very slowly! TRD (Tabernacle Relief and Development) has purchased a rubber tree plantation and is busy clearing the land for tsunami housing projects. CRWRC hopes to begin building homes there for 19 families in the next few weeks.

Many children of the Angulana Camp are now attending schools closer to their new homes. The teachers who ran the extra classes and initiated the school-to-school project assisted the families in ensuring that their children were able to continue their studies after they moved. The remaining families are being cared for by IOM (International Organization for Migration) and TRD.

Batticaloa Projects

CRWRC has funded the building of new homes for some more families in the Batticaloa district; this time in four Muslim villages. As these families had already been given the government building grant of \$2,500, their new houses have been built to roof level and they were waiting for funding to complete their houses. They reported that an INGO (International Non-Government Organization) had promised them assistance but then left. After conducting a survey to determine if they qualified for the CRWRC grant, over 100 families have been registered. As it is now almost 3 years since the 2004 tsunami, the villagers have been able to resume or find livelihoods to support themselves and their families. Although not many INGOs are building homes they are supporting various livelihood schemes.



To date CRWRC funding has made it possible to complete over 300 homes here in Sri Lanka with another 500 homes in various stages. We are still planning for a completion date of year end!

The Conflict

The Government army has 'liberated' the East Province and is now concentrating on the Northern Province. Sea and land battles have taken place and the lives of civilians and soldiers have been lost in this last ditch effort by the government to rout out the LTTE Tigers and 'free' the Tamil people. In the Sri Lanka President's address to the UN, Mahinda stated (in Sinhalese thereby continuing to alienate and anger the Tamils) that he is hopeful and working towards a peaceful solution and military action is limited to actions required to restrain the terrorist LTTE from terrorizing the Tamil people. Meanwhile the Sri Lanka press reports that the President is pursuing a military solution and will go for peace talks only if this initiative fails. Although the government claims that civilian lives are not disrupted, the media reports that ... *Due to the constant apprehension about LTTE infiltration, the government troops are on high alert, manning hundreds of checkpoints at which the people are*

searched and sometimes detained...creates a climate of terror in which people are afraid to speak, even of their own sufferings and the injustices heaped upon them.



On the issue of the promised development in the Eastern Province which the government has recently 'freed' from the clutches of the LTTE by shelling their homes and destroying crops, cattle and possession, the media reports that *The government is so badly strapped for cash that it is finding it difficult even to make pension payments, although it has printed cash in a manner that has driven up inflation to near 20 percent, has borrowed heavily from the state banking system, and now has approached commercial institutions for massive foreign loans.*

From January to June 2007, 547 persons have been killed and 396 persons have disappeared. Meanwhile the Sri Lanka government states that it is opposed to visits by the International Human Rights Commission claiming that a democratically elected government should be trusted to do what is best for its people.

Medical care

Although there is free health care in Sri Lanka, one must be ready for long line-ups for only emergent and basic care as most clinics and hospitals are privately owned (many from India) and not affordable unless you are fortunate enough to have a job with health insurance benefits. Sri Lankans will visit the doctor at the first sign of any ailment and feel that the visit is successful if they come back with at least three prescriptions. These are filled at the local pharmacy – tiny packets of about 5 pills to each prescription with one often being an antibiotic. Doctor shortages due to emigration and work at private hospitals and clinics lead to complaints of doctors filling their waiting rooms with patients so they can cash in on the 400 to 500 rupees per visit (\$4-\$5).

The Garbage Collectors

Probably the most difficult job on the island is that of garbage collection as the 30 degree 80% humidity quickly turns food waste into smelly slime. A recent article outlines the difficulty these workers face as their work hours and benefits are being cut. *We have to touch all types of garbage including biological waste from hospitals with our bare hands. We don't have gloves and they haven't even given us the Dettol (antibiotic) soap we are entitled to. We have to submerge ourselves in drainage pipes and sewerage pipes with effluence rising up to our nose. Do you think anyone likes to do that kind of work? We do it because we have no other way to live.* The average pay of a worker is \$100/month and they run a high risk of contracting tuberculosis and other infections as they perform their work without gloves, boots (many are in bare feet) or protective clothing.

Kandy Perahera

In August we travelled upcountry to spend the weekend in the town of Kandy for the world famous Parade of the Tooth – the Esala Perahera. Hidden in the hills of the interior, Kandy was the last fortress of the Sri Lankan kings until the British captured the king and sent him to Europe as a trophy. Kandy was also the site of an ancient Buddhist temple which had the honour of housing a



religious relic – Buddha’s tooth. Buddha made two visits to Sri Lanka and at his death, his followers sent one of his teeth to be kept as a memorial. The Kandy festival of dances and lights evolved into a parade where Buddha’s tooth encased in a jewel encrusted case was placed on the back of an elephant and paraded throughout the city. Over time fear of vandals led to the creation of a substitute tooth and once a year during this festival a Buddhist priest enters the vault in the Temple of the Tooth to pay homage to the original relic. Thousands of people, pilgrims and tourists, make their way to Kandy for the 10 day festival during the full moon of July/August to visit the temple and to see the parade. People sit on the sidewalks from morning until the beginning of the parade at 8 p.m. This year’s parade consisted of over 83 elephants dressed in lights along with hundreds of dancers, drummers and coconut torches bearers. The security was incredibly tight and we had to pass many check stops for body and bag searches. Our staff managed to purchase some sidewalk seats for us and we could spend the day exploring the town instead of securing a free sidewalk seat.

Kite making

Sri Lankans love to fly and kites and every year there are festivals and competitions to see who can make the best kite and who can fly their kite the highest and longest. George, a kite lover, was fascinated by the peacock kites made by the local people.



On Saturday, our trishaw driver come over with bamboo sticks, tissue paper, glue and string - all it took to make a beautiful kite which

we flew on the beach. George took notes and hopes to make some kites for our grandchildren when we return home.



Understanding others

In the wake of 9/11 there have been numerous articles sent via email denouncing Islam using misleading and hate-filled

information. In Sri Lanka Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam are the predominate religions and Christianity, even after 500 years of ‘Christian’ colonialism, still only counts for about 6% of the population and that mostly among the English speaking, middle class population. Many Christians here in Sri Lanka are second or third generation and, like many North American Christians, do not understand nor take the time to understand other religions (including Catholicism) often believing that they should distance themselves from ‘heathen’ beliefs. Indeed many have never visited Buddhist or Hindu temples nor have any knowledge of these faiths even though the majority of the people one meets in the Colombo area will be a Buddhist or Muslim. The local newspapers have extensive coverage of the various faiths and we have been able to read about and to speak with those of differing faith backgrounds. This has led to a strengthening of our faith and to a greater understanding, appreciation and love for our fellow human beings.

The October issue of The Banner published an excellent article by Rev. David Feddes on the Muslim faith entitled *Understanding Islam* at http://www.thebanner.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=1201. The Sri Lanka Daily News in their weekly Christian Perspectives section ran an excellent article *People of diverse faith can live in harmony* by R.P.Jayasuriya at the site below (scroll down to find) <http://www.dailynews.lk/2007/10/03/fea08.asp>

Getting to know a Muslim family from Saudi Arabia while waiting for parade to begin.



Just after this picture was taken, a police officer stopped and tried to make the woman remove her burka. Her husband managed to keep his cool and stated that she would be happy to in the presence of a woman officer as his religion forbade her to be uncovered in the presence of other men. They eventually let her stay. Let us know if you would like soft copies of the above articles or more information in future newsletters re Buddhists or Hindus.