

HELP ORPHANS NOW INITIATIVES



POST TSUNAMI SRI LANKA

OBSERVATIONS, EVALUATIONS AND PROJECT PROPOSALS

12 MAY 2005

INTRODUCTION

The sheer magnitude of the generosity expressed by the Australian community in response to the 10 January 2005 ABC telecast on the 7.30 Report¹ of the Boxing Day tsunami prompted the formation of *Helporphansnow* (HON).² HON is an organisation committed to helping orphan children in Sri Lanka recover from the devastation caused by the tsunami by providing them and other destitute/orphan children a hope and a future.

Given the countless offers of financial and other assistance, it was necessary, after some preliminary communications with contacts in Sri Lanka, to visit Sri Lanka so as to ascertain first hand what the specific needs are. This was fundamental to know how best HON can make a difference to the orphaned/destitute children in a manner that provides both transparency and accountability to the donors.

The team consisted of: -

Chris Moane, Bob Gamble and Matthew Carota, the principal, architect and project manager respectively of Integrated Building Consultancy (the Sydney based company that volunteered to re-build the orphanage shown on the 7.30 Report); and Sharminie Niles of HON and husband Arul Niles.

At the Sri Lankan end, Narel Atkinson, a relief worker of Ozaid, joined the team on the trip to the affected areas.

Cori Garratt, a volunteer from Sydney who had just completed an Oxfam fund raising cycle ride around Sri Lanka, also joined the team as an observer.

VISIT TO SRI LANKA – 17 APRIL TO 24 APRIL 2005

Arul and Sharminie arrived in Sri Lanka on Sunday 17 April and the IBC team arrived on Tuesday 19 April. On arrival, we made contact with all those we had identified as possible partners and other useful contacts.

We met with Alison and Narel Atkinson who are both actively involved in post-tsunami relief work and have many years of experience working with disadvantaged children.

¹ This segment was a follow-up of the segment done on 23rd December 2004 which focussed on the Sri Lankan Orphanages Project. This project began 10 years ago, sending gifts to 20 children in one orphanage at Christmas. Last year, over 3750 gifts were sent to as many children in orphanages in Sri Lanka, irrespective of race or religion. See also transcripts on ABC website and www.helporphansnow.org.au

² The HON Board members are **Kumi Abeysuriya** (Sustainability Researcher), **Shan Ali** (Grameen Foundation representative), **Leonie Armstrong** (Lawyer), **Judy Becker** (Teacher), **Richard Botta** (Mining Engineer/Sr Pastor), **Dayantha Fernando** (Accountant), **Catherine Gray** (Lawyer), **Chris Hensman** (Surgeon), **Stuart Miller** (Administrator/Human Resources Management), **Sharminie Niles** (Lawyer) and **Rohan Rajaratnam** (Cardiologist).

Narel volunteered to accompany us to the affected areas, which was of invaluable assistance.³

We met with Chrisantha Hettiarachi, the General Secretary of the National YMCA of Sri Lanka to discuss project proposals and to finalise arrangements regarding the meetings in tsunami-affected areas. We have had a long association with Chrisantha as he co-ordinates the annual gift distribution to the children in the orphanages.

Another very helpful person we met was Chrisso Handy who is actively involved in co-ordinating post tsunami work in the North-East of Sri Lanka. Chrisso gave me information on a very needy orphanage in Jeyapuram, and has provided me with a CD describing the current conditions experienced by the children in that orphanage. We are currently awaiting a formal project proposal.

We spoke with Rev Ebenesar, General Secretary of the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka, regarding the re-building of the Komari orphanage, and with Mr. C P Tennekon of the Rotary Club of Kurunegala, who in turn referred us to other Rotarians in affected areas.

The IBC team arrived in Sri Lanka at approximately 2am on Tuesday 19 April, laden with confectionary (from Allfect Confectionary), hand made toys (from Arden Anglican School, Beecroft) and toiletry bags (handmade by a group of ladies from the Hornsby Baptist Church). We picked up the IBC team from the airport and drove straight to Batticaloa in a hired van. The roads were bumpy, particularly as we travelled through the interior areas and it was 9.30am before we arrived in Batticaloa .

THE EAST OF SRI LANKA

1. Re-Construction of the Jesu Ashram Orphanage, Batticaloa

After a quick wash and change, we proceeded to our first meeting regarding the re-construction of the destroyed Jesu Ashram orphanage, IBC's primary focus.

We met with Mr. David of the Batticaloa YMCA, Sister Yogam, the nun in charge of the orphanage, Rev. Joseph Mary, the Catholic Church representative, and Mr. Robert Marselline, the local engineer. The meeting was held at 6 Station Street Batticaloa, the alternate premises allocated by the Catholic Church for the housing of the Jesu Ashram orphans. The property at No 6 is on a block of land approximately 15m x 34m, situated on the main road and adjacent to a busy shop (see photo 1) .

³ Narel is Sri Lankan and Alison is Australian. They have worked with disadvantaged children in Sri Lanka for many years. Since the tsunami, they have been working with temples, churches, schools and other organisations coordinating relief work all over Sri Lanka. Tasks include identifying urgent needs and channelling aid received into providing such needs as fishing boats, bicycles, sewing machines, uniforms, food, cooking utensils etc to the needy. Their long term vision is to help children in need through Ozaid, a company registered in Sri Lanka as of February 2005, whose directors are mainly Australian.



Photo 1. – No. 6 Station Street, Batticaloa

While at No 6, we met some of the children who had been a part of the Jesu Ashram home. We distributed the gifts of sweets, toys, toiletry bags and chocolate cake we had brought and they were visibly overjoyed (see photo 2).



Photo 2. - Gift Distribution, 6 Station Street, Batticaloa

We ascertained that the property on which the Jesu Ashram originally stood before the tsunami hit is a 5 acre block and that, even after allowing for the 200 meter boundary, it would still provide ample space for the orphanage to be re-built. The reason for transferring to 6 Station Street was because the sister-in-charge was nervous to go back to the original site. However, after some discussion, it was agreed that re-building on the original land may be more beneficial for the children.

After conducting a site inspection of 6 Station Street, we proceeded to the original Jesu Ashram site and the IBC team conducted a site inspection (see photo 3).



Photo 3. – Original Jesu Ashram Site

The site, though situated in a beautiful spot not far from the sea on one side and the lagoon on the other, now looks completely desolate. Nobody lives in the surrounding area and the destroyed/damaged houses, temples, churches and vehicles are a testimony of the tsunami as if it had taken place only a few days ago (see photo 4).



Photo 4. – Area surrounding Jesu Ashram

The tsunami has also taken its toll on the vegetation, with the palmyrah trees knocked over or dead. Sister Yogam showed us the coconut trees that she and the children had climbed for safety. She also told us the story of the caretaker and his wife who lost their lives saving the children of Jesu Ashram. The caretaker had been an orphan too and had been brought up by Sister Yogam at the Jesu Ashram orphanage. Now his children who escaped the tsunami are orphans and will most probably be a part of the Jesu Ashram orphanage, a sad cycle of life.

Chris and the team from IBC were convinced of the need to re-build Jesu Ashram. They were glad to make contact with the local engineer who will be working with IBC in finalising the plans and obtaining the necessary local authority/municipal approvals.

Having conducted their site inspections, IBC concluded that the orphanage should be re-built on the original site in a ‘Queenslander’ style design (See photo 5).

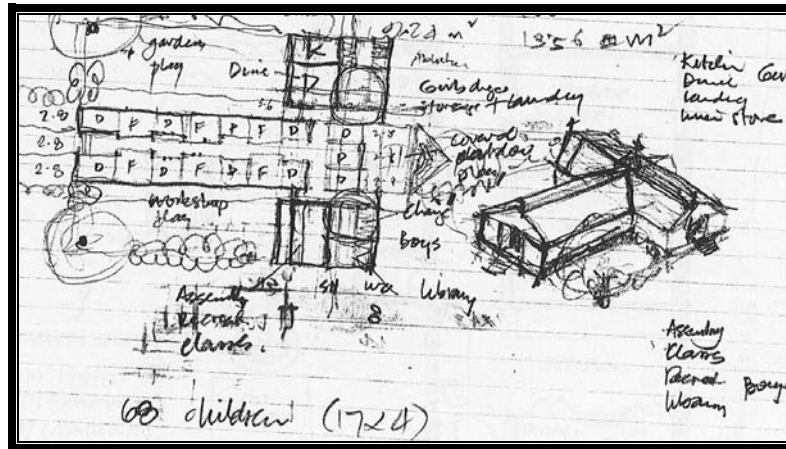


Photo 5. – Conceptual Sketches of the proposed Jesu Ashram re-construction

Sister Yogan was overjoyed and most thankful that there was now hope for the children of the Jesu Ashram orphanage.

She said that many people had approached her about caring for new orphans and destitute children but she could do nothing until they had some permanent abode (see Photo 6).



Photo6. – Sister Yogan (4th from left), Bob, Matthew, Chris (3rd, 5th, 11th – IBC) and Sharmine (7th HON)

2. Proposed educational centre at 6 Station Road

We also discussed the possibility of converting No 6 into an educational/vocational centre. It is envisaged that the centre will provide lessons in English, computers and music, as well as other vocational training such as sewing and woodwork. Children from many orphanages in the area would be able to participate on a weekly basis after school and benefit from the opportunities offered. During the day, the centre could serve as a pre-school for tsunami-affected children and a vocational centre for the mothers.

This proposal was welcomed by the Catholic Church representatives and the YMCA representative, Mr. David. The building will require some modification and furniture and equipment such as computers, sewing machines and a piano, will need to be

provided. Mr. David will prepare a project proposal including an estimate of the capital and ongoing costs that will be required.

Visit to other orphanages

3. Life Voice School

The Life Voice School is an initiative of the Batticaloa YMCA and caters for children with hearing and speech difficulties. Many of the children became deaf as a result of the shelling during the civil war. The children were eagerly awaiting our arrival and were thrilled with the chocolate cake we distributed.

Mr. David drew our attention to the need for a van to transport the children to the school as their numbers have now increased significantly. This van could also be utilised for transporting children to and from the educational centre we propose funding, referred to above.

4. Kalvanchikudy

We then drove along the coast to Kalvanchikudy, a village further down the south eastern coast, which was also heavily affected by the tsunami.

There was hardly a person in sight in the affected areas, and yet the unaffected areas were bustling with activity (see photo 7).



Photo 7. – Damage to Coast-Line

We visited an orphanage that had been affected, although not as badly affected as Jesu Ashram. Re-construction work had commenced with funding that had been received from overseas so we concluded that there was no need to provide any further funding here.

We were unable to visit the badly damaged Shri Shakthi Girls Home as planned. However, Mr. David will send us a project proposal regarding the re-construction of this home.

Thirukovil, Komari and Kalmunai

The next day we visited other affected areas in the East. The route we had to take was along the coast and we were again confronted with the havoc and devastation caused by

the tsunami. The scene was very much that of a war-torn city: desolate, abandoned and ruined. There was no sign of any life in the areas that had been affected. Narel told us that the roads had previously been impassable and bridges had been destroyed. Much has happened since then to make road travel possible, however, the surrounding areas still needed clearing from the rubble left in the wake of the tsunami (see photo 8).



Photo 8. – Re-Constructed Bridge

5. Thirukovil

At Thirukovil, we visited an orphanage for boys run by the Methodist Church. This orphanage was marginally affected in that the water had come into the building but did not destroy it.

The person in charge, Rev. Thayanithi, appeared to be a very well-organised and capable person with great vision. He showed us many of the vocational training schemes he had begun, including a computer lab, car washing equipment, wood turning etc. He has also begun a sewing class for young girls from the nearby refugee camps so that they can make a living. We watched about 15 young girls at work in the class that day (see photo 9).



Photo 9. – Sewing Class

While at the orphanage, we met a young boy who had a severe physical disability and was in a self-drive wheel chair. He told us how Rev Thayanithi helped and guided him to make a living selling coconuts and how he now has a bank balance of over Rs 8000. Clearly, all he needed was some guidance and encouragement (see photo 10).



Photo 10. – Success story of Boy in Wheel-Chair

We then visited the coastal belt of Thirukovil which is said to be the worst affected area in Sri Lanka. The particular street we drove through looked like a ghost town. We met a young boy who had returned to what used to be his home to look for study notes as he was studying for his HSC. Not surprisingly, nothing could be found and Rev. Thayanithi said he would help him with the requisite books.

We also happened to meet two local women who had lived in the area until the tsunami struck. One of them recollected through inconsolable tears how she had run against the tide with her two-year-old baby girl in her arms but the water defeated her and her daughter had slipped out of her arms without her realising.

The other woman we spoke to told us how her parents and her sister's family were washed away leaving her sister's six-year-old daughter, now orphaned. She is one of the fortunate kids who has immediate family to care for her.

As we drove off, we saw the woman who lost her baby wander aimlessly through the rubble and debris (see photo 11.).



Photo 11. – Thirukovil Damage

6. Komari

We then proceeded to Komari, another coastal village that was badly affected by the tsunami. Here, an orphanage for girls was completely destroyed leaving only the slab as evidence of what previously stood (see photo 12). Fortunately, all the children escaped.

The children are now temporarily re-located until the home is re-constructed. Some are with distant relatives and others are in other orphanages. We identified the re-building of this home as a possible project. Rev. Thayanithi has undertaken to send me a formal project proposal.



Photo 12. – Slab of Komari Orphanage

7. Refugee Camps

On our return, we stopped at two refugee camps. There were hundreds of men, women and children housed in small tents that had no floor covering, just erected straight onto

the sand. The day we visited was very warm and we learnt that the tents were usually scorching hot during the day and leaked when it rained.

Many of the people we spoke to told us how they had previously lived in two- or three-bedroomed houses in the area, and now were homeless. Most of those in the refugee camps were people who were self employed and had now lost their source of income. We distributed the toiletry bags, lollies and toys to the children in one refugee camp and lollies and chocolate cake to the children in the other (see photos 13 & 14).



Photo 13. – Gift Distribution at Refugee Camp



Photo 14. – Inside a Refugee Tent (note the sand)

8. Kalmunai

We then proceeded to Kalmunai. Here we met the local Rotary President, Dr. Pushpalatha, who was very keen to set up an educational/vocational centre to cater for the local children and young adults. We asked her to send us a project proposal.

We then proceeded to visit a temporary abode for 11 boys who had lost their parents through the tsunami. They are currently under the care of Rev. Callista of the local church to which the children and their families belong. We gave them more of the goodies we had, including a chocolate cake for them to share. Unfortunately, Rev. Callista was not in but I reliably understand from Narel that there is potential to open a home for the existing children, with the possibility of expanding in the future (see photo 15).



Photo 15. – Kaluminai Boys Home

We left Batticaloa on Thursday, 21 April. On route, we stopped at yet another refugee camp where the people were being sheltered in a rice storage shed with asbestos roofing. We distributed the remainder of the lollies and toys among the children (see photo 16).



Photo 16. – Distribution of remaining gifts

Chris and Bob were due to leave for Sydney that night (Matthew was staying on with us until Saturday.). On the way to the airport, the IBC team had their first and only “tourist” experience: an elephant ride.

COLOMBO

Lotus Buds Home: ‘A Model Children’s Home’

Later that evening, after getting Chris and Bob to the airport, we visited the Lotus Buds Children’s Home to have a glimpse of a children’s home with a difference. This home is run by Therese and Roger Koelmeyer and has been in operation since 1989. It functions as a family home rather than as an institution. There are about 22 children in the home . The girls attend Methodist College, which is a private school. Each girl has more than one sponsor as the costs are more than the usual costs of maintaining a child in another orphanage. The oldest of the girls, Rosie, married recently and has gone to England with her husband for further study.

We interviewed Rosie’s sister Viji, whose mother had abandoned them when they were very young. It was wonderful to hear Viji’s story as her life could have been very different had she not been a part of Lotus Buds. She is now a confident, educated woman whose life has been transformed by the power of love.

This is probably the ideal model for a home where the children feel that they are part of a family with parents. It was interesting to hear how Therese battles with the dilemma of not being able to offer the home to more children as she believes in providing quality care to a manageable number. She does however take new children on as the older kids leave the nest (see photo 17).



Photo 17. – Lotus Buds Family (Roger & Therese 2nd row5th from left and Viji back row 6th from left)

THE SOUTH OF SRI LANKA

Early the next morning at about 3am, we ventured south to investigate the needs and project possibilities of that region. Narel had a local contact who is involved in relief work in the south who met us and took us around.

There seemed to be more re-construction happening down south with many houses being built by Habitat. Each small house consists of a lounge-room, one bedroom, veranda, kitchen and toilet and costs approximately Rs 80,000 to build.

The scenes of destruction, however, were still very evident. We saw lorries and buses that had been overturned by the tsunami and countless buildings that were razed to the ground. It was quite strange to see the beautiful, calm ocean on one side of the road and the destruction that that same ocean had caused on the other side (see photo 18).



Photo 8 – Vehicle Damage

1. Weligama

We visited Weligama and met with many villagers who had been affected. Although, the stories told by old and young of loss and destruction were no different from those we had heard in the East, each story expressed a fresh sense of hurt, pain and loss.

2. Galle

We saw the derailed Colombo-Galle express train, which had now been put upright, standing as a monument to remind us all of the nearly 1500 lives that were lost (see photo 19).



Photo 19. – De-Railed Train in Galle

In Galle, we also visited a drug rehabilitation centre called Nawa Jeewana Amadyapa Handa (Voice of New Life without Drugs) run by Raja Weerakoon, a man who had once been one of the most wanted criminals in the area and had spent 20 years in jail.

Raja is now a deeply religious, transformed man . He has, for over the past 10 years, run drug rehabilitation centres with great success. We saw the photographs of awards made by UNESCO recognising him for the success of the centres.

Raja did not know us or why we were there. However, interestingly and co-incidentally or perhaps providentially, he had felt strongly about the need to set up an orphanage for the children of drug addicts just two days prior to our visit and had made some enquires about land availability. On the day we visited him, someone had contacted him regarding available land and he was confident that this project will soon be on its way. He neither asked us for assistance nor appeared to be concerned about how support would be forthcoming. He was quietly confident that it would come to pass.

We were particularly impressed with his organisational skills and how well the drug rehabilitation centres were being run. We spoke to many of the participants in the program and others who had completed the program and were now working there. We also met prison officials who were conferring with Raja to seek his advice on drug rehabilitation programs in prison. They also testified to the success of Raja's centres.

Narel is liaising with Raja about sending us a formal project proposal regarding the establishment of a children's home in Galle for children affected by the tsunami and others.

We returned to Colombo early evening and departed for Sydney later that night.

NON-TSUNAMI RELATED PROJECT PROPOSAL

Minneriya Home for single mothers and children

We were approached by Mrs. Asoka Perera, who is involved with an orphanage in the North central province, Minneriya, which was not affected by the tsunami.

This home is run slightly differently in that it provides a safe haven for single mothers and their children, battered women and orphans. The home was founded and is run by Mrs. Lilani Goonatilake, a retired English teacher, who is committed to improving the life of such people under the auspices of OUTREACH (Organization for Unified Training to Restore Esteem, Ability, Confidence and Health). I am acquainted with the founder of OUTREACH, Mr. Asoka Perera.

Currently, the funding for the home comes from the proceeds of the sale of pigs. Mrs. Goonatilake is keen to begin a vocational training centre to teach the women how to sew and thereby earn a living. To do so, she requires a building, tables, 4 normal sewing machines, 1 zig-zag machine and 1 over-lock machine, all of which will cost approximately Rs 289,000 (Aus \$4000).

I have asked that a project proposal be sent to us for further consideration. I have also asked Narel to visit the home to provide me with an independent report.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, the trip was a great success. The team worked really well together, despite the hectic pace in less than ideal conditions, and all the members shared a deep sense of commitment to make a real difference.

The trip provided us with an opportunity to meet, and discuss the needs of the tsunami-affected, with the people at the coal face. It also afforded us the opportunity to visit the affected areas and get a sense of the extent of damage caused by the tsunami, as well as talk to the affected people and gain an understanding of their specific needs.

The IBC team found the trip beneficial on many levels: as a familiarisation and fact-finding tour; to conduct the requisite site inspections; and to make and strengthen contacts. Chris Moane of IBC commented, "I went to Sri Lanka wanting to build an orphanage; I have returned committed to building lives".

It is envisaged that HON will work with various inter-racial and inter-religious individuals and groups in Sri Lanka such as Rotary, YMCA, Ozaid, and others. It is proposed that we form a board in Sri Lanka comprising representatives of groups we will be working with. The board in Sri Lanka will be accountable to the HON board and will be responsible for visiting the HON projects on a monthly basis, providing monthly progress reports and financial statements on work undertaken and expenses incurred.

PROJECT PROPOSALS

Eastern region:

- *Re-building Jesu Ashram at the original site in Batticaloa by IBC; providing ongoing sponsorship
- Setting up and running an educational/vocational centre at No 6 Station Road for children in orphanages, providing weekly lessons in English, computers, music, sewing and woodwork after school on a rotational basis. *The same venue will function as a pre-school and vocational centre during the day for tsunami-affected children and women
- *Re-building Komari Girls Home and providing ongoing sponsorship
- *Re-building Shri Shakthi Home
- Setting up and running an educational/vocational centre in Kalmunai along the lines described above
- *Building an orphanage in Kalmunai and providing ongoing support;
- Funding the purchase of a van for the use of the Life Voice School and possibly for transporting the children from the orphanages to the educational centre and back

North eastern region:

- Building suitable accommodation for the girls of the Jeyapuram Home and providing ongoing sponsorship

North central region:

- Funding a vocational (sewing) centre for the Minneriya Home for single mothers and children and assisting with regular support

Southern region:

- *Building or establishing an orphanage in Galle and providing ongoing sponsorship

The asterisked project proposals are entirely tsunami-related. The other project proposals will benefit children affected by the tsunami and others. The projects we ultimately fund will be decided by the HON board on a case-by-case basis having considered the formal project proposals sent to us and dependent on the availability of funding.

Now to the work of prioritizing the projects, finding funding and moving each one from proposal to reality...let us proceed as we began 10 years ago, one small step at a time.

“If you cannot feed a hundred people, then just feed one”
Mother Teresa

For further information on HON projects please contact:

Sharminie Niles

Tel: 98762670

Email: helporphansnow@yahoo.com.au or info@helporphansnow.org.au

For further information on the re-construction of the Jesu Ashram orphanage,
please contact:

Chris Moane or Matthew Carota

Tel: 88145999

Email: chris@ibc.net.au or matthew@ibc.net.au