

12 April 2005

Satyodaya and Tsunami Victims

In the Satyodaya Blue Bulletin of January 2005 we reported on our three visits to the victims:

1. To the East Coast on 30-31 December 2005
2. To Batticaloa on 10 January 2005
3. To Galle and Matara in the South on 13-15 January 2005

To the North

Following up on these three visits, Fr Paul visited Jaffna and Mullaitivu in the North on 5-9 February. On 1 March 2005 one of our daily newspapers, *The Daily Mirror*, carried his long article, "Travails in the North in the Aftermath of the Tsunami".

The following extracts from that article may be reproduced here:

"[In Jaffna] the first impression was of a city under siege. Palaly is in a High Security Zone and the men and some women of the Armed Forces are everywhere. At Velvettithurai on the evening of arrival in Jaffna, there was the first evidence of the tsunami devastation in the North. In and out of the maze of little lanes we went to the sea and were told of how the waves invaded the land. At the sentry point three soldiers on duty told us how two of their men were among those washed out into the sea. All the way from Velvettithurai along the coast on both sides of the road the devastation was similar to what we saw earlier on the journey from Colombo, through Korallawella, to Matara.

At the Catholic Church at Sakkottai, we saw a Portuguese doctor and nurse at work with patients: wounds suffered while being tossed by the waves from one tree trunk or stone to another, bronchitis and fevers, severe shock. We were impressed by the devotion to duty of the Portuguese medical team. The priest was there as translator and as friend and counsellor to the children who gather there every evening for supervised night study. Whatever happens, fair weather or foul, the children of Jaffna keep to their books and their priests are close to the people. It was dark when

we arrived at Point Pedro. On the way we delayed at a Mahavira Thuyilam Illam. It was one of several in the North and the Sleeping Place of the Great Heroes was most beautifully laid and could not but be a source of inspiration to the youth of the North. How short-sighted it had been of the Army Colonel to order the bulldozer to ride over the graves! Undeterred, the Tigers laid them out again.

The return to Jaffna from Point Pedro was by another route via Kaitadi.

The next day we travelled southwards from Jaffna to the islands. We visited a place of worship which, after the recapture of Jaffna, the Army had used as a soldiers' camp; after many months of negotiations, the Army had finally vacated the place. If there had never been an idea of willful desecration of a place of worship, neither had care been taken to treat places of worship of another faith with respect and reverence. The soldiers who occupied these places of worship had left mischievous drawings on the walls and added playful festoons, sometimes funny moustaches, to religious icons. They often did so without malice, like school children on a picnic, but did not pause to think that they would hurt the sensibilities of those to whom the place of worship belonged and who had used it, and would one day use it again, for prayer and devotion. In no circumstances – so it seems to me – should a place of worship be used as an army camp. Take the grounds, if needed, the rooms for visiting pilgrims, if there are any, but leave the temple itself untouched.

On 7 February we went eastwards via Koppay, Chavakachcheri, Kodikamam, Miresuvil, Pallai, Elephant Pass and Paranthan to Mullaitivu. If I was asked which single place I had visited after 26 December seemed to have been most ravaged, it wouldn't take me long to say, Mullaitivu. We first went to the Maha Vidyalayam there. The Principal and the priest-teacher were there talking with groups of students. But the school itself was if it had never been built. About 200 children had gone with the tsunami, some bodies never to return to Mullaitivu. The priest broke down as he told us that many of the children he had buried in mass graves had been his own students. The Principal too was visibly shaken. A wall or two of the pre-school conducted by the Tigers remained. A well-built house still stands, but outside

it, planted in the sand were five Crosses to mark the graves of the five people who had lived in it before the tsunami came.

We were told that at least 5000 persons in Mullaitivu snuffed out the taper of their lives on the terrifying day of the tsunami”.

To Batticaloa Again

On 4-5 April six members of Satyodaya proceeded to Batticaloa again. The specific objective this time was to go to the large unused buildings of the Sinhala School which had been turned into a refugee camp for some of the victims of the tsunami.

Among the refugees in the camp were members of the 290 Burgher families (191 from Dutch Bar and 99 from Uppodai) who were badly affected by the Tsunami. Of these families 220 lost their houses with all that the houses contained: furniture, kitchen utensils, TVs, radios, clothes and bed linen. One lady survived and emerged from the tsunami with all her clothes gone. One of the men who came to render what help they could took his shirt off and gave it to her to put on until further help came.

We had been told that many of the Christian Burgher and Hindu Tamil children had lost their footwear to the waters and so had to go to school barefoot, or not at all. So we took them 120 pairs of shoes (60 white for the girls and 60 black for the boys) of various sizes and 240 pairs of white socks – all of which we were able to purchase in Kandy thanks to the tsunami assistance we received from readers of this report and others. It was truly moving to see the thankful smiles on the faces of the children as they took hold of the shoes and the socks.

We met a Burgher lady of about 40 accompanied by her little daughter. The lady told us how she was nearly carried away by the three successive huge waves but held on grimly to a thorny bush. She was badly bruised (she showed us the scars on her hands and feet), and needed anti-tetanus injections. But she was saved. The little daughter fortunately was carried away by the raging waters into a hole from

which the waves could not take her out. She was pulled out by some army men not less than 7 hours later – a truly remarkable escape from death.

In the school the next morning we heard several more harrowing stories: one of a father and mother washed away at Dutch Bar while all the surviving children could do was to set up a wooden cross on the sand outside what had the day before, Christmas Day, been their happy home where they had eaten the Christmas cake together and together sipped their home-made wine. “Was anything spared?” we asked. “No, nothing at all. The waves, some of them 30 feet high, took everything away. We don’t mind that one bit”, they said, “but why did they take away Mummy and Papa?”

We returned to Kandy late on the 5th evening, greatly chastened, but happy that we had been able to turn some tears of sadness into wistful smiles of joy.

- Satyodaya Team