

## Stories of compassion, courage and inspiration from the Tsunami devastated zones of the conflict affected North of Sri Lanka

*Whilst carrying out post-tsunami recovery work for the World Health Organization in the North of Sri Lanka, my colleague, Dr Sivarajah and I came across many stories of stoicism, courage and resiliency from the people and communities we worked with. Here are three such examples.*

### The 'special child'

Location: Polikandy West displaced camp, Point Pedro, Jaffna

When the sound of a gushing wall of water and muddled screams resonated in the ears of a fisherwoman living off Jaffna district's Point Pedro coastal belt, she instinctively ran towards her two children, grabbing her 3-month old baby and 3 year old child. Then holding her baby tightly near her bosom and her 3 year old by her hand, she scurried inland, seeking higher ground. Her husband was not at home at the time the Tsunami waves bombarded Sri Lanka's coastline early on Sunday morning.

The waves hammered into her small dwelling and the surrounding landscapes with such a force that she was unable to secure her grip onto her 3 year old. "The waves," as she stated, "stripped away my child from my arms". Devastated after watching her child being washed out to the ocean and with all hope for her husband lost, she scrambled towards a temporary shelter (the local school building) that was being set up by the displaced community. She was later reunited with her husband at the displaced camp, and they both grieved the loss of their son.

Two Sri Lankan Army soldiers who were on a mission scanning the devastated zone, upon hearing the cries of a child discovered a small boy clinging clumsily on the branches of a tree. The soldiers then carried the boy from one displaced camp to another, that were dotted along the Point Pedro coastal belt. In this way the baby boy was finally reunited with his parents. The community at Polikandy West village at Point Pedro in Jaffna district, hails this boy as being a 'special child' as he was able to 'miraculously' survive the onslaughts of swirling water. The family is also expressed deep gratitude to the two soldiers that rescued their son.

This experience is significant not only because of the spirit of survival and altruism it exhibits but because it occurred in an area where tensions between the occupying Sri Lankan army forces and the local Tamil communities have been simmering over the 25 year civil conflict. Most of the families living in the area, including this fishing family, have been displaced a total of three times over the past two decades since the escalation of violence began in 1983; first due to the war, then due to the military occupation, and finally due to the Tsunami.



Mother and child at Polikandy West Transit camp (Photo by Kolitha)

## A photo genius

Location: Killinochchi District Hospital

In the acute phase of the humanitarian emergency following the Tsunami, the dynamic yet resource poor hospitals operating in the conflict affected areas faced numerous challenges. Firstly, there was an influx of patients suffering from a variety of conditions ranging from asphyxia, fractured femurs, traumatic head injuries and severe cuts and abrasions (especially prevalent among those living within the high security zones that were cordoned off by barbed wire fences). A regular stream of trucks and tractors also brought the bodies of the dead to the hospital grounds. These victims were salvaged from the devastated zones by the search and rescue operations that were mobilized by the community, LTTE and Sri Lankan Army personnel within hours of the Tsunami. The hospital grounds were partitioned and an area was cordoned off as a makeshift mortuary.

The families and relatives of those missing who were courageous enough to wade through their own grief, injuries, and their own displacement, reached the hospital as their final destination point to confirm the death of their loved ones. Identification was a difficult task as the asphyxiated, edematous bodies that were filled with sea water bloated excessively and decomposed quickly in the hot climate. Disfiguration due to decomposition occurs rapidly in such instances.

Amidst this confusion, one Killinochchi resident displayed remarkable vision, courage and ingenuity. In the hours following the disaster, he grabbed his camera and sought permission from the director of the hospital to photograph the faces of those dead and dying as they came into the makeshift hospital mortuary. The images were then stored on a hospital computer and were identified by the families and loved ones in their subsequent visits to the hospital, some coming in weeks after the event. This also contributed to gain more accurate picture on the numbers of dead and missing for local authorities.



Overcrowded corridors at Killinochchi district hospital  
(Photo by Koliitha)



Mortuary at a hospital in Southern Province  
(Photo by Getty images)

## The Mullativu miracle?

Location: Mullativu

A Priest who was delivering a sermon for Friday mass (24<sup>th</sup> December) stopped abruptly when a light bulb hanging overhead flicked and then fused. He immediately stated this to “be a bad omen”. He advised the congregation of around 350 people, who were all from the coastal communities of Mullativu, that the Sunday morning service be held in the neighboring Church many Kilometers inland. The rationale for his decision was unknown.

On the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> December, the Tsunami devastated the entire coastal area of Mullativu, in some parts of the coastal belt encroaching up to 3.5 km’s inland. Mullativu district was one of the worst affected districts of the entire country. The Church at which the Friday sermon was given was completely destroyed. When Dr Sivarajah and I visited the site, only the turrets holding the symbolic Christian cross stood amidst the mounds of sand and rubble. When the waves struck the Father and the congregation was completing their morning prayers in the church building inland. No one from the community had gone to the main Mullativu church that morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> - which some called *Black Sunday*.



The devastated coastline of Mullativu, 3 days after Tsunami struck. The entire section of the main road here has been washed out to sea. (Photo by Kolitha)

Mother and daughter hold hands and survey the devastation many weeks after the Tsunami (Photo by Kolitha)

