

NEWS RELEASE

The first thing we did was to embrace the victims with love and compassion. We started with listening; listening to how victims of the Tsunami were affected. Tsunami victims had not been asked what their needs were and were receiving winter clothing, chocolates (that had melted at the harbor), expired medication and other items such as sleeping mattresses when there wasn't even a roof over their head. We commenced our efforts by giving educated aid. We helped install water pumps to clean the water wells, provided medicine for children (as most of the medicine sent was of adult dosage), offered psychological services (as they still have very few psychologists to help with the emotional trauma), and commenced the building of permanent homes as the temporary homes are too hot to live in, are quickly flooded during the rains and have very little running water and toilet facilities. Most of the people have abandoned the temporary homes and are now living with close relatives or friends. Even strangers have taken them in.

While the infrastructure is back on track with the rebuilding of roads, railways and bridges, people ask why they are not receiving the same priority. Funds, from people around the world, are not getting to the victims first. In Kalmunai, we were still finding human remains. Proper clean up has not happened, and many have been buried in mass graves without being identified. A young boy expressed his sadness as he told us that his brother did not receive a proper grave. He explains that as people walk near the sea they are accidentally walking on his grave that is marked only by a stick. Families are saddened with the reality that they have not, and cannot give their relatives a proper grave.

Tsunami victims are quick to say that they are not poor, nor are they refugees therefore they do not want to be treated as such. They wish to be treated with respect and dignity. Victims are not receiving much aid other than basic food rations and we found ourselves giving out basic aid like shoes, as it gets too hot to walk. The people, already traumatized by the Tsunami are now made to struggle just for the bare necessities, which are driving them into more depression and withdrawal.

Second mission to aid the Tsunami victims-10th April to 15th Aug 2005

(We provided very much needed medical supplies for children, Psychological services, clothing, shoes, water pumps(to clean the water wells), educational supplies, toys and sponsorship of children who have lost their parents by providing them food, clothing, school fees and medical aid)

The team comprised of five members- Ashid Bahl / President & Founder, Members –Julia Hart & Niru Bhatia of Calgary –Dr Fazal Khalid & Dr Mariyo Wanigathunge of Sri Lanka branch of the Society
This mission was made possible by the generous contribution made by the Wild Rose Foundation.

On the 12th April we took a 6:00 am flight with Sri Lanka Air force in a 20year old Russian built Y-12 plane that would take us to Ampara district (North Eastern Province) from Colombo. We started our aid mission by driving from the airfield to Kalmunai, where the Tsunami first hit Sri Lanka. This was our second visit to aid the victims, first being in January. One has to be careful in going through this area because of terrorist activities. Much of the debris has not been cleared, I ran into human remains while walking near the beach where there used to be homes. Here in Kalmunai we provided very much needed medical supplies that also catered for children. We also have plans to build permanent homes on purchased land rather than Government designated sites to avoid a lot of red tape and bureaucracy that is causing a lot of delays in building. We met with Mr. M. Sivapathasundaram (Manager of National Housing Development Authority (Kalmunai), who revealed to us that they needed 27 thousand permanent new homes for the victims. This would cover the area from Kalmunai to Pottuvil on the eastern coast that was hard hit by the Tsunami.

He said that although plans were under way to build permanent homes and while still assessing the situation, there were no actual permanent homes built so far. I was astonished to hear and later see for myself by a road trip that such a big area of this eastern front had only temporary homes, which were in the form of tents and others made from metal sheets or wood. These were scattered at long intervals along this coastal line. Subsequent to talking with Mr. Sivapathasundaram we met with Mr. Nabavi Junaid chairman of National Housing Development who also concurred that in all there were 66,000 new homes needed to be built of which only 300 were actually built so far for the whole of Sri Lanka. He showed us a map that indicated possible land sites for new homes which was marked by President Chandrika Bandaranaike herself. We were told that homes that were originally beyond the 200 meter zone could be built on the owner's original land and those within this zone would have to be located on government designated land. When we visited the people living in these temporary homes they spoke with anger about their frustrations as the shelters were too hot and lacked water supply and toilets. Some of them left these temporary homes and went to live with relatives and friends as a lot of the others are doing. It is a good thing that the community came together to help each other. They said that government officials and different NGO'S would visit them and take pictures but no one would commit or answer their many questions in regards to them getting permanent homes. Most of these small tents or other temporary shelters held 8 to 10 people. We ran into one tent, which had a family of 8, and one of the little girls was lying down on the floor with a high fever. We had her removed from the tent and our member Dr. Fazal attended to her sickness. Here also we gave a local temporary Maruthamunai Hospital (the original of which was completely destroyed after the tsunami) medical supplies and toys. There were looking for land within the town to relocate this hospital. Here a psychologist told us that there were only two of them in the whole province to help the people who had lost their loved ones, which was overwhelming for them and us providing this service was very welcomed by them. One older woman at one of the camps told us that she was angered at a politician who had never paid a visit to them called them poor people and from his office would determine what type of home or land they could expect. She said that they were not a poor people, but a proud people who should be treated same as any rich person.

In Pottuvil we saw mass graves along the coastal line, people who came to see their loved ones were saddened that they could not receive a decent burial. Some had to pray to the whole area of the mass graves as their loved ones were not in marked graves. A little boy took me by my hand and showed me his younger brother's grave. He said that he did not like it when people accidentally walked over his grave as it was very close to the beach and small to notice. Young women doctor's parents prayed at her grave, they were lucky that they were there at the time of her burial and persuaded for her to be buried separately. We gave medicine to the Pottuvil Government Dispensary, where due to lack of medicine, Dr. Mariyo Wanigathunge said, "You have probably heard of Doctors without Borders, we are called Doctors without Medicine".

We visited another school here that was also completely destroyed and needs to be relocated; we are looking to help them buy the land for only \$ 6,000.00.

Here we met Krishanthi Ganeshmoorthi , a ten year old girl who lost her mother. We will be sponsoring her and 34 other children by providing them with food, clothing, school fees and medical aid which would \$30.00 per month for each child. When I first saw her she was numb and withdrawn but when she learned of our support a smile of her face showed a sudden ray of hope. We gave her a plush toy and she turned my attention to her feet and I understood that she also wanted shoes, which we have been providing as the ground is very hot to walk on. Another little boy to be sponsored was Rasheed Mohammed who sat on the foundation of what used to be his house. He would not stay inside his temporary tent as he felt comfort from the little remains of his home and brought back memories of her mother who he had lost to the Tsunami.

In Galle we visited the Sambodhi Home, where we dropped off our member, Niru , who was to provide psychological services to handicapped children, forty of who were killed during the Tsunami. Many of the children already facing different challenges were further traumatized. Here we gave clothing and funds to keep their rehabilitation programs to continue.

We recognized some people who saved or came to the help of others caught in the Tsunami by presenting them with society medals. One recipient was Dr. Rukmal Gamage(unsung hero) who while traveling on the express train from Colombo to Matara, at Telwatta, was hit with the first wave and immediately told the people to run inland away from train. When the second wave came after 20 minutes he managed to climb a tree and after the water declined he helped to pull people out of the train. He later helped these victims who were taken to a nearby temple where he gave them first aid and resuscitated people back to life. That day he helped save about 50 people from the train that was taken off the tracks and tumbled several meters away from the tracks. People who were on the road and beach got carried towards it and got swept under it.

Another was Kumara, a brave sailor who instead of running away ran towards the waves to save 30 children innocently engaged in prayer studies in a mosque near the sea. Thereafter he led many in his small village to safety. The sailor patrolman had been scanning the waters for any unusual terrorist activity when he saw the water levels rise, then enveloping a huge boulder and gush over the concertina wiring that separated the land from the beach. We even visited with a brave elephant that escaped with little injury, which was near the sea at the time of the tsunami, which sensed that there was trouble coming and headed away from the sea in the process saving his caretakers who had to follow him.

I have single-handedly given \$ 75,000.00 worth of aid so far but it is not the amount of money but what you did with the funds is important. Taking time off from my job with loss of pay I volunteered to help because I genuinely wanted to. If I got just a fraction of what was received by the big NGOs I could have done much more. We asked many people about the generous outpour of funds and aid from people around the world and if they felt that this improved their shattered lives. They responded by saying that you only have to take a look at us, and the conditions were living in to know that the aid is not reaching to us, as readily as we thought it would. They are very angry and frustrated, which is the last thing that we wanted to see nearly five months after the tsunami. We are currently in the process of building a school (with the help of our agent Dr Fazal Khalid) that was destroyed by the Tsunami and raising funds to start the building. We also have a housing initiative under way to build some permanent homes.

Submitted by Ashid Bahl / President and founder