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In tsunami's wake, victims grope for light of new day

NAT YOGACHANDRA
GUEST
ESSAYIST

Walking down a beach road in a small fishing village here in eastern Sri Lanka is like entering a ghost town. Saris hanging from branches sway in the wind; videotapes and school books are scattered on the sand; huge trees lie across the sand, roots clawing at the air. Once, the people here lived by the ocean's ebb and flow. The Rev. Joseph Mary, a parish priest for more than 50 years, is one of them.

The Rev. Mary calmly described the day the tsunami struck: "It was Sunday, Dec. 26. The time was around 9 a.m. The Holy Mass was over and people had gone home. I was about to have my breakfast when I heard the panic-stricken voices of people outside the church: 'The sea is coming, the sea is coming.' I ran out and lo and behold the sea had spread out its fangs and was rushing to devour us. I yelled out and asked everyone to run into the church."

For the Rev. Mary, like tens of thousands of others who live along the coastal areas of southern India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and a few other Asian nations, the tsunami's impact has touched all aspects of life - destroying families, homes and businesses and separating babies from their mothers' hands.

Kathiresan is a 40-year-old fisherman. He lost three daughters and one son, ranging in age from 6 to 14, and his wife. His house was leveled to its foundation. His first warning that something was wrong were his neighbors' screams. By the time he started waking his children, the water was engulfing them. They were swept away. We met Kathiresan in a refugee camp. He has trouble sleeping and eating now.

Subsistence fishing and tourism



Courtesy Nat Yogachandra

Natascha Yogachandra, daughter of Nat Yogachandra, gives her favorite Beanie Babies to children in Sri Lanka who were left homeless by the tsunami.

were the primary economic activities in the areas hit by the tsunami, which killed more than 150,000 people in 12 countries ringing the Indian Ocean. Thousands are still missing. The poorest of the poorest suffered most.

During our one-month journey, I, my wife and daughter have visited several schools, shelters, camps and temporary orphanages to provide comfort.

We heard story after story. We listened and provided school supplies, hurricane lamps for more than 500 fishermen, furniture and toys for community centers and pumps for water systems.

Americans have shown they are caring; the U.S., along with several other nations, came running to the aid of tsunami victims. We heard accounts of U.S. Marines working, day upon scorching day, building bridges, clear-

ing roads and boats. Some large fishing boats, standing in streets as far as 500 yards inland, were hauled away.

Now, more than two months after the tsunami and a flood of high-profile visitors to south Asia, there is a strong need for monitoring, transparency and accountability to ensure that the millions of dollars of aid reaches its intended recipients and is used efficiently.

Rebuilding efforts need to have long-term benefits and need to be largely indigenous. Reconstruction provides these nations the opportunity to move toward a greater degree of local empowerment and self-sufficiency. □

Yogachandra, a Fairport author, has relatives and friends living in the area affected by the tsunami, including a brother in eastern Sri Lanka.