

AACAP News

Reaching Out to Tsunami Victims in Sri Lanka

AACAP Member Dr. Paramjit Joshi and Team Provide Disaster Relief Efforts in Response to Still Devastating Tragedy

■ Paramjit Joshi, M.D.

"The sea gave us everything and then in a flash one sunny morning it took everything away." These are the words of a fisherman who sat hunched over his destroyed boat as he described his painful memories of losing his entire family—his wife and three young children. The fisherman was in the fishing village near the coastal town of Mullaitivu in Northeast Sri Lanka. Such tales were heard along the entire coastline of the island from Jaffna on the northern tip of the island and Galle in the South. Sri Lanka itself is approximately 250 miles wide and 450 miles long. The Indian Ocean tsunami that hit Southeast Asia last December is the largest natural catastrophe in living memory leaving in its wake an unfathomable toll of death and destruction.

This was a ten-day 1,000 mile journey for our group that consisted of Dr. Sandy Waran, President of the American Association of Physicians from Sri Lanka; Timothy Gill, a nurse and patient safety officer; Tyson Trish, a reporter with the *Daily Record* in New Jersey; and me. I became involved with this project after contacting Dr. Waran about how I could help. He had heard of my work previously in the Balkans and asked me to go along. Our team was charged with the mission of ascertaining the immediate and long-term psychosocial needs of those affected and an

assessment of the emergency relief efforts and future medical needs. While other members of the team focused on the latter, I spent my time talking to relief workers, teachers, counselors, and governmental and non-governmental officials about the psychological impact of such a disaster, what services

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(Above photo) This little girl found comfort in the arms of her grandmother, unlike many children who lost entire families in the tsunami.

(Top photo) Dr. Paramjit Joshi was one of four team members on a mission to assess medical needs and emergency relief efforts for survivors of the tsunami in southeast Asia last December. The children and families pictured lived in a refugee camp in Mullaitivu, a coastal town in northeast Sri Lanka.

were in place and what were still needed. But from my perspective, and most importantly, how were the children faring?

In our meetings with the head of the psychosocial relief efforts at the Centre for National Operations (CNO) in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka on the West Coast, he informed us that "there were enough doctors and aid workers that had arrived from overseas to help and they were in line to be deployed to different parts of the country." However, what we were not told was that there were parts of the country, especially the Northeast, that had received very little help. This part of the country is under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that has been in a civil war with the Sinhalese Government based in Colombo for well over 20 years. Therefore, our team decided to spend the bulk of our efforts in the North. I for one, had completely underappreciated the decades-long conflict and the negative impact such conflicts have on the population.

We traveled to Kilinochchi, the headquarters of the LTTE, where we stayed at the health center that was understaffed, had few medicines except for those allowed to trickle in, and certainly had no mental health professional. I was asked to consult

with the Center for Women's Development and Rehabilitation which is a grassroots women's organization developed in 1991 to help women and children who had become victims of war. The population in this part of the country was now facing yet another tragedy—that from the tsunami. There were already children who had been orphaned by the war and now there were more—approximately 600 who had lost their parents to the ravages and wrath of nature.

A mother who had hung on to her two-year-old child during the tsunami and then was unable to hold on anymore and let go, told me, "God must be angry with us, first the war and now the wave." There were camps set up in schools where many families lived in classrooms. They were still waiting for the tents to arrive and be set up so that schools could reopen for the rest of the children. High school graduates were provided some basic first aid skills and were stationed in these schools to take care of minor ailments. Just as they do all over the world, children played with each other and some hung onto the adults not wanting to leave their side. We were told how frightened the children had become of bathing or going near the sea again. Many had recurring dreams of the "wave coming back" and nightmares. In Batticaloa in the East, the

University classrooms were turned into refugee shelters housing many of those whose homes and villages were completely washed away.

The governmental officials requested that we educate the teachers and the other health professionals to better understand how children and adults respond to such traumatic events. The teachers were especially hungry for information. Education is greatly valued in Sri Lanka for girls and boys, much to my delight, and is provided free.

Like any disaster, the children are bound to have significant psychological repercussions for many years. How has this disaster affected their mental health? How do coping styles differ between Eastern and Western cultures and how can we in the West help? While there are several organizations, both local and international, involved in the rebuilding and relief efforts, we the members of AACAP need to think about helping survivors cope with the long-term psychological impact of the tsunami. There are many among us who are well trained in trauma relief efforts and could get involved. This can be achieved by linking up with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) already in Sri Lanka, such as Sarvodaya, the single largest local NGO providing training around such issues to teachers and other health care providers. There are several reputable relief organizations that are listed on the United Nations web site at www.un.org.

Perhaps, over time and with our help, the children of Sri Lanka will once again play on the sands and build their castles and dreams. ■

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At left, Dr. Joshi hugs a 7-year-old boy orphaned by the tsunami. In the photo above, these two little girls, who were housed in a camp at a village school, smile for the camera and Dr. Joshi.

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