

Notes from Sri Lanka

Political issues add to the struggles of tsunami victims

I am writing from Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, a small city on the edge of the Indian Ocean which is now host to displaced people whose lives were devastated by the tsunami which swept away peoples' homes, livelihood and loved ones in the Dec. 26 disaster, wreaking havoc and destruction across Southeast Asia and killing more than 180,000 throughout the area.



HARRIS

And now, two and a half months later, people remain stuck in refugee camps in a limbo of loss, disconnection and unknowing about their future, which, in turn, keeps them stuck in the grief, confusion and intense loss of their recent past.

I am here having responded to a request for mental-health workers to join a mental-health outreach team to work with victims of the tsunami to move beyond the trauma of their experience. The Mental Health Outreach Team is collaborating with The United

SIKHS, an international relief organization that is organizing this effort as well as many others in tsunami impacted areas.

I am part of the third team of this program in Batticaloa, each of which has a three-week commitment. Team No. 3 consists of my niece, Cynthia Crisafulli, a clinical social worker; Jan Wichter, a psychologist graduate student from Germany; Perry Prince, a psychologist from Oregon who has extensive experience working with the Red Cross doing mental health, disaster relief; and me, a clinical psychologist. Vikram Singh, a young Malaysian psychology graduate, is the very capable United SIKHS coordinator of our team, and Anthony Suthan, is our wonderful translator. Suthan, as he is called, is a young, local man studying to be a Jesuit priest, who lost his business and inventory as a computer repair person.

To set a geographical and social context, Sri Lanka is an island approximately the size of West Virginia situated off the southeastern Indian coast in the Indian Ocean. The nation of Sri Lanka would definitely be considered Third

World in terms of the development of its economic resources and the working infrastructure of the island itself. It took eight hours to drive the 130 miles from the capitol, Colombo, on the west coast, to Batticaloa on the east coast.

The population is approximately 75 percent Sinhalese from southern India, 18 percent Tamil from northern India who live primarily in the north and the east of the island, and 8 percent Moslem. The Sinhalese are primarily Buddhist, and the Tamil are Hindu. Since Colonial days, there has been conflict between these two groups, which escalated into a civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelan claiming their right for an independent state. Although there has been an official ceasefire in the last few years, incidents of violence had been increasing prior to the tsunami.

The shifting of the Earth's plates under the ocean off the coast of Indonesia caused a major

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Darlene St. Peter, Supervisor Special Education 436-1000

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disruption in the ocean itself, which caused huge waves to sweep across the sea affecting coastal areas of Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka but also as far away as Africa.

It is almost impossible to imagine the sight of a 120-foot wave that apparently engulfed the coastline of Indonesia near the epicenter of the quake.

Locally, one person referred to the height of a coconut tree - approximately 40 feet - to get a frame of reference for height of the water that moved across the local coast.

But even that image of height cannot evoke the breadth and hugeness of the ocean advancing upon a coastline of fishing villages.

And because even natural disasters happen in a social context, what became apparent was that the waves of tsunami relief were going to the Sinhalese south of this island, while the Tamil north and east coasts have not received equivalent attention or resources.

Needless to say, the continuation of historical discrimination has fueled longstanding anger resulting in a resurgence of the violence of the civil war.

Add this history to the personal and social disruption of the natural disaster, followed by further evidence of discrimination, and we have a recipe for growing social unrest.

Our life here is not this abstract. Today we went to the primary refugee camp where this program has been working.

Four hundred and seventy four families - more than 1,000 people - have been housed in two buildings of the Methodist Central College, a secondary school in the center of Batticaloa.

These people are primarily from the fishing village of Navalady located across a lagoon from

Batticaloa on the Ocean.

Of approximately 1,099 inhabitants of Navalady, at least 620 died.

At the college we met people living 20 to 50 to a room, trying to maintain some privacy and make sense of lives that will never be the same.

Perry and Suthan were repeatedly greeted by men, women and children who have been participants in the ongoing groups where people have been encouraged to talk about what has happened and what is currently happening in their lives.

It is not only the immediate losses of the tsunami causing distress, but the ongoing lack of normal structure to their lives, the lack of employment, school and reliable family connections that are maintaining the hopeless, disorientation and despair.

And yet these people seemed so pleased to see familiar faces. So many aid people apparently appear and disappear. They ask when we will return for more groups.

And yet, the residents of the building where we had been holding groups have been informed that they either have to move to the building across the road which is already overcrowded, or to another camp far away, since the principal of the school is insisting that school must return to session.

Of course life of the students of this school who are not refugees must resume, but the cost of this is further dislocation of the lives and hopes of the refugees.

Of course there are clearly no easy answers for these complex problems but so often the needs of individuals get lost when making bureaucratic decisions.

Editor's note: Kathryn Harris is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Lewes. She is currently offering her expertise to families in Sri Lanka who are still suffering from the results of the tsunami.

Young named director of Delaware AARP

Lucretia B. Young of Wilmington has been selected to serve as state director of AARP Delaware.

"As we grow older, our communities are in the midst of a fundamental transformation. AARP members are engaged in creating positive social change at all levels. Ms. Young brings vision and valuable experience in working with elected officials, community organizations, business and volunteers to this leadership position in Delaware," said Mark Chapman, AARP's northeast regional director. AARP Delaware serves more than 146,000 members in the state through advocacy, service and education concerning issues impacting the 50+ population and their

families.

Young recently served as director of organizational development and director of Agency Services for Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the oldest and largest

youth mentoring organization in the United States. Young received a bachelor of humanities and is currently completing her studies towards a master of public administration.

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