

Strength to Stand Again

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Monday, 25 April 2005 00:00

On December 26, 2004, the strongest earthquake in 40 years struck the Indian Ocean. It set off a series of lethal tsunamis which churned over the sea at a speed of 800 kilometers (500 miles) per hour. Sri Lanka is at least 1,000 miles away from the epicenter of the earthquake, but it still became the second most heavily damaged country after Indonesia.

"Allah gave me everything, and I commend everything to Allah." Despite the environmental devastation that has torn apart their land, the Sri Lankan people have found comfort and strength in the religious beliefs that shape their culture. They have found the power to rise up again and rebuild their lives, searching out new ways in which to rediscover the original abundance and richness of life.



Hambantota is a long, narrow city located on the southern coast of Sri Lanka. To one side is a spectacular view of the Indian Ocean and to the other side is a salt-water lagoon. A scattering of tourist villas were once dotted along the beachfront area leading up to the famous Yala National Park. Hambantota's reputation as a renowned holiday haven was growing because of its close proximity to both the beach and the park, which resulted in a steady increase of tourist visitors each year. Holidaymakers could enjoy the best of both worlds, either choosing between the long stretches of pristine beach or alternatively venturing into the wild terrain of the park.

Every Sunday, farmers and fishermen from the surrounding areas would travel to Hambantota to sell their produce at the market. Gradually, the Sunday Market, which had begun as a small collection of sellers, became the busiest meeting place of the week. Villagers came from near and far to attend.

December 26, 2004, was the first Sunday after Christmas. As the sun began to raise its head sleepily over the land, the people of Hambantota also began to wake up and greet the day.

The news about the opening of a new hot-meal shop in the Sunday Market had aroused the interest of many local shoppers and by 9 a.m. the streets of Hambantota were filled with villagers. Not many people were aware of the strange change in the ocean's behavior.

The originally peaceful sea had begun to recede at a terrifying pace, as suddenly as though the land had frightened her. Soon afterwards a huge tidal wave, with the force of thousands of horses behind it, came stampeding over the busy city, not caring for the lives or property that stood in its way.

Within only 20 minutes, the bustling city was entirely demolished. All the clocks in the city stopped at 9:21. The disaster caught everyone off guard because it happened at the busiest and most productive time of the week. The deceased would never know that the tsunami had been caused by an earthquake in another country.□

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The tsunami swept through the coastal areas so suddenly, and with such terrific force, that it damaged 70 percent of the island's coastline and killed over 30,000 people.□

The earthquake occurred to the west of northern Sumatra, Indonesia, and stirred up a 10-meter-high (32-foot) tsunami which churned forward over the Indian Ocean at around 800 kilometers (500 miles) per hour.

Sri Lanka is like a drop of water on the Indian Ocean, which is why it was so severely damaged by the tsunami. One hour after the earthquake, the giant wave swept across the coast, damaging 70 percent of the coastline and killing over 30,000 people. Homes, roads, bridges, crops, and fish were all swept away, and drinking water, electricity, and other basic amenities and infrastructure were completely destroyed. All normal economic activities ceased.



Horrified survivors witnessed not only the deaths of their family members, but also the complete destruction of their homes and belongings. Their hearts were ravaged. The 2004 tsunami will go down in Sri Lankan history as the most damaging natural disaster ever to have occurred in its 2,000-year heritage.

Within 36 hours after the earthquake, Tzu Chi made a decision to send a medical team of 36 doctors, nurses and volunteers to Sri Lanka via Singapore with 1,800 kilograms (3,968 pounds) of medicine and relief goods.

Colombo is both the capital of Sri Lanka and the country's gate to the outside world. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, rescue organizations and news teams from around the world were crammed into Colombo. All the local hotels were jammed.

The Tzu Chi team arrived on December 30. With assistance from Graetian Gunawardhana of the Lions's Club of Colombo and Anil de Silva of the Leader Day Company, the team visited the Minister of Health before taking buses to Hambantota, 240 kilometers away. They immediately set up a medical station so that they could begin helping the local hospitals, which were seriously inundated with injured patients.□

Kanthis lost three children in the tsunami. She hadn't eaten for days but simply murmured repeatedly, over and over again, her wish: "Let me die..."□

Tsunami survivors stayed with relatives and friends, or sheltered in local temples, mosques or schools. There were over 30 shelters in Hambantota, and the Tzu Chi volunteers visited a few of them.

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