

# Big work, small place

## *The Army marches on disaster*

Story and photographs by Bramwell Ryan

**S**ri Lanka: She looks like a badly drawn stick figure sketched by a child. About 55, messy black hair, a red sari over a bruised and scarred white shirt. She wears no shoes and carries herself with no gracefulness. She has the fast-forward dash and stop movement of the disturbed, her body twitchy and hyper vigilant. Dashing past splintered trees, rushing over crumbled concrete, stepping gingerly around twisted rebar and shuffling across clothes rotting in stinking mud puddles she ran and stopped, ran and stopped her way through the rubble.

As she stuttered closer, her eyes too wide, her hands covering her throat in the way of nervous women she started to speak. The words, in Singhele, rolling out in a gush like the wave that stole her sanity. Her eyes locked in place but it took a moment for her to realize that her listener couldn't understand the majority language of Sri Lanka. She unclasped her right hand, two fingers unfurled and with a smoothness that contrasted with her body's jerkiness, she stretched

her arm and pointed at the pile of rubble she had just left. "My... my.... hoo... hoo... home." Her voice was echoless like the sound of the deaf when they speak - flat, stripped of nuance, a pale monotone in a world of stereo colour and chaos. "My home..." she said again, her fingers pointing at a concrete pad piled with the debris vomited there by the Boxing Day wave in which she lost everything, including her mind.

On December 26, 2004, a 15-foot wall of water traveling at 400 miles per hour chewed into the coast of Sri Lanka, a tiny, teardrop shaped island nation of 19 million in the Indian Ocean. One of the hardest hit areas was Galle and for miles

around that small town are signs of the damage. Twisted tree trunks as thick as phone booths lie on top of crumbled concrete; clothing and splintered

furniture; shoes and pieces of battered fishing boat cover the land. Small vegetable plots are now fetid pools of black water, a toxic leachate pulling in sewage, rotten fruit and the eggs of malarial mosquitoes.

When the tsunami swept across the countries of south Asia a cry went up that was heard around the world. So many lost their lives, their homes and their livelihoods that the people of the world responded to that cry. Now, backed by some of the most generous donations in history, humanitarian organizations are helping rebuild. Near the community of Hikkaduwa, just up the littered coast from Galle, The Salvation Army is staking out hope. Here, where 12,000 lost their lives and 53,000 lost their homes, the Army is going to dry some tears.

The Salvation Army works in 109 countries, including Sri Lanka, where it has been active with churches and social agencies for more than a century. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, indigenous Army personnel started offering their friends and neighbours the help one expects from the Sally Ann - food and shelter, succour and prayer. Within days, the Army's international emergency and disaster office based in London was on the scene in many of the countries affected by the tsunami, including Sri Lanka. Within a week international teams were on the ground coordinating and directing the Army's development-oriented relief aid.

Currently in Sri Lanka the Army has a six-person team, all experienced international experts. Upon arrival they got to work on the unglamorous job of inching a project forward. As in most emergency and disaster settings constant meetings, endless repetition of goals and plans, entire forests of paperwork is the soil into which feeding programs, housing projects and other life saving and restoration measures are planted and can grow.

The initial fruits of this labour sprouted on January 18, 2005, when The Salvation Army was the first humanitarian organization to be given land by the Sri Lankan government. The land is beautiful. It is 244 acres of abandoned rubber plantation that is cool, green and peaceful. Located near the village of Galgodawatte about six kilometres from the Indian Ocean, the acreage is a mix of trees, including pepper and cinnamon, a flat open valley and savannah-like fields. On this patch of earth, The Salvation Army will confront the tragic limitation of all relief and development work - not being able to help everyone. Instead, it is doing a big work in a small place.

And this big work will be life-changing. Over the next weeks and months tents flown to Sri Lanka from London, England will provide temporary housing on the property. Concurrently the tent dwellers will help the Army build permanent shelter. In time,



Left: Blind and crippled, this man lost everything in the tsunami including the cart he used to sell coconuts.

1,000 homes will be built on the Galgodawatte land along with a clinic, income generation activities and a community centre. This is a holistic development – it's not just about bricks and foundations, roads and sewage treatment, it's about restoration.

The Army believes in ministering to the whole person and has already been meeting and helping people who will eventually live on the land while they were sheltering in schools. Community counseling by an experienced team of indigenous outreach workers augmented the Army's food distribution in those camps. Before the tsunami, this team was used in community AIDS work. Now, drawing on language and cultural strengths, this counseling team is working with traumatized refugees, helping them marshal the inner resources needed to carry on. This team will permeate the development of the new community at Galgodawatte. And this integrated development approach of addressing physical, emotional and spiritual needs is urgently needed because the pain just doesn't stop.

At the end of January, refugees, who had sought shelter in area schools following the disaster, were evicted. For the second time in a month they were homeless. For people dealing with dead family members, lost livelihoods and lost homes, the pressure is intense. When they were ordered out of the schools, some, fortunate enough to own ancestral property, returned home. But for many, like the woman who lost her mind and family members, the rubble is piled on their hearts and it will take gentle excavation to clear the debris. For others with their own land but nothing on it except debris, the Army is pitching tents on their property so they have

somewhere to live until reconstruction can begin.

Elsewhere, the sad repetitious song of all disasters is being played yet again. The poor, who already had little, are the ones hardest hit. Many of those who lived along the coast were squatters, day labourers, fishermen and the semi-destitute. Their lives were already strained; the tsunami simply melted away some of the bonds they used to keep it all together. For these people in particular, the Army's development at Galgodawatte is an answer to prayer. Especially since the Army only accepted the land from the government on the condition that once the homes are built, and the community established, then families in each dwelling will be given clear title to their houses.

"God did more damage to Sri Lanka in 20 minutes than people did in the last 20 years in the war," says one survivor. The Army's unofficial motto is to serve humanity with a "heart to God and a hand to man". In the restoration of minds and homes, the rebuilding of shattered lives and forgotten dreams at Galgodawatte, the Army has the faith to believe that something good can come from the wreckage.



Above: A Catholic priest and a Salvation Army minister speak with a village chief to determine who is most in need.

Below: Tent supplied by the Salvation Army is put up on the site of a house swept away by the tsunami.

