

Angelina Jolie's Sri Lanka Journal

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There are many humanitarian concerns regarding the displaced and recently returned in Sri Lanka (both internally displaced persons/ IDPs and refugees) after nearly two decades of conflict. These include danger from landmines and unexploded ordnance, inadequate shelter, food, water, sanitation facilities, health facilities, educational facilities and little to no justice. For these reasons, at the time of our visit, UNHCR in Sri Lanka cannot yet advocate organized return until conditions become more conducive to the displaced restarting their lives in safety and dignity. Despite the welcome political progress that has been made since the signing of the cease-fire in February 2002, the humanitarian needs in Sri Lanka are currently growing as a result of the large numbers of spontaneously returning IDPs (approximately 271,000 of 800,000 in 2002). Over the past year, while donor countries and aid agencies have begun "investing" in the war-affected areas of the North and East, more targeted poverty reduction, infrastructure repair, and reconciliation programs are needed to ensure that IDPs and refugees can not only to their pre-war homes, but can recover their dignity as they seek normalcy.

We fly from Colombo up to Jaffna (click [here](#) for the map) and arrive at the high security airport at Palali. No civilian movement is allowed in this area. Ten thousand families are still prevented from returning due to the "restricted movement in high security zones."

Freedom of movement has been improved since the first of February. The main north-south road opened in April 2002. The plane we just took started only 3 months ago. Before that, the only way for civilians to get to and from Jaffna was a 23 hour boat ride that only went once per week.

We are driving straight into the Wannu, which is an area controlled by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). It will take a few hours. We pass over a bridge often closed by guards. UNHCR has to call on the radio to check if we can get through. Swirls of barbed wire line the sides of the bridge about 10 feet out on either side. A second line of barbed wire is visible in the water.

We continue to pass broken down buildings. In this area of the country 75% of all homes were destroyed. Some areas like Chavakachcheri were 100% destroyed from heavy fighting. I notice a few hand painted "BEWARE OF MINES" signs with pictures of bodies being thrown by large explosions.

We go onto the famous A9 Road (or Highway). The fact that we can drive on it is a sure sign of a cease fire. We drive through what are called "free civilian areas." It is a very poor but beautiful country. There are children at water wells bathing. Some home's gates are covered in leaves of tobacco drying.

It isn't long until we see barbed wire again. We are approaching the front line where the Sri Lankan Army area and the LTTE area meet. More and more men in fatigues with guns gives you the feeling or reminds you that fighting could start again at any moment. Flags are pointed out and it is explained to me that Red and Yellow ones are LTTE or Tamil, and blue and green ones are Sinhalese. Suddenly, the sides of the road are lined with red sticks and "danger – landmines" signs. Also the tops have been blown off many of the coconut trees. I ask why and I am told it was to give them a better line of sight when they are fighting. I ask Neill Wright, who is the UNHCR man I am traveling with, if it was the Sri Lankan Army who blew up the trees. "Both sides" he clarifies.

We pass a small area of "no-mans land" controlled by the ICRC (Red Cross). We enter the LTTE area. There are many mine signs along the road. The few structures of what is left of buildings have a few walls still standing and are riddled with bullet holes. There is one small structure housing a 2 ft high statue of what looks like the Virgin Mary. There are very few Catholics in this area, but somehow she survived all the fighting.

The people who live in this area of the country are very under the thumb of the LTTE, the tigers know every movement. They pay taxes to the LTTE. "What is the average salary per year?" It is about 60,000 rupees if they work 26 days a month, which is equivalent in US dollars to \$700.

On our first stop we visit a returning family of three generations. They started returning about 12 months ago. We walk into the house that is right behind a large bomb crater, which is now filling up with garbage. The grandparents meet us and three little kids run up. Neill explains that he has brought me here to show me what it is like returning home. This was the home the grandfather was born in. They left when the bombing started and for seven years they were displaced.



I look at the house and there is no roof, a broken water well, and big holes from bombs and shells in all walls. This small building houses 8 people living in three rooms. I would guess that each is 10 x 5 feet wide all with holes and bars on windows.



The grandfather points to a large pile of rubble and says, "My brother's house. He has not seen it yet." He jokes, "Much work to do." There is nothing to do but cry and start all over. Another lady comes out with a very small baby. The home is on the coast and the son has gone fishing. They were recently able to acquire a wooden boat which is clearly a very big deal. It is

a true source of pride. They have nothing but each other, but they are alive and so they are happy.

We head to the UNHCR office in Kilinochchi. It has only been two months since they have been allowed a 24 hour office in this area. They still have no staff accommodation here. "This will come soon, we hope," Neill says. "It is very hard on the field staff here who have to drive in and out very far every morning and night." I meet the UNHCR staff, a quick cup of tea and we move on. The UNHCR members are, as usual, a mixture of local people and some international. One woman, Jae Park is from South Korea. She is a UN volunteer. It is always interesting to me how someone like her finds herself in the Wanni (the jungle) of Sri Lanka helping. Jae and a few others in this area are looking after over 150,000 people displaced from war. How do all these individuals from all different organizations end up here or in places like this? It gives me hope for the good in human nature. For these people, who do a hard days work, where the benefit is more for others than themselves.

The Death Penalty exists here under Sri Lankan and Tamil Law. Recently two men, Tamil soldiers, were fighting each other – one injured the other. The man was taken to court, found guilty, and was given a death sentence. I ask "Have they done it yet?" Thinking of the way it is in the states, where you can be on death row for years. "Yes," he says. "They immediately took him out and shot him. Things are different here."

Next we visit a group of about 10 families. Some were displaced in the country during the war and had been refugees in India. I ask to sit and talk. I am brought to a tree for shade. There are many mothers and many children. We wait for mats. Plastic mats arrive and are thrown on the dirt. We sit and they tell me their story. They were displaced in 1990 and they went to India. They came back in 1992 but were displaced again by the fighting. They were moved again in 1999 to government welfare centers where they faced many difficulties. They wanted to return to this area "because," they say, "this is our home."

Upon their return, they found UNHCR. “Because we have a lot of children our main concern was a cow.” I ask what they do for food. “They get some dry rations from the government but very little. All the men are away working in paddy fields or on odd jobs to make up for the small food ration.” Sometimes they cannot find a job. That is the problem. I ask what their main concern is now? They say, actually receiving the money allocated to all people who have returned home from the government, 25,000 rupees or about \$250 US dollars. It’s very little but it is promised so they can rebuild homes or shelters. It is an amount of money promised by the government after the cease fire, to promote returns to your home and encourage rebuilding amongst the rubble. It sounds like a good idea. Hopefully the funds will actually find their way to the people soon.

They are concerned the rainy season will start before they get the money. Now the small mud and cement temporary homes have UNHCR plastic sheeting for roofs. They also need pens and paper for their children for school.

Neill speaks of how they can help generate income for the displaced. “You have to eventually get the people working to get the economy working again, apart from recovering their self respect. We drive past the court of Tamil Eelam. It is a big new building. You realize how strange it is because the LTTE are not recognized as an official government. But here, inside their area, this just is the law.

We visit a home of orphaned and abandoned girls. There are about 516 here, the age ranges from 1-16 years old. We sit and meet with the group of 12 to 16 year old girls. I ask what they want to be when they grow up. They raise their hands after I ask the question. Many want to be doctors, a few teachers, but not one girl wanted to be a mother. We make clear, “not now – when you’re older.” Still, no one says anything about motherhood. Maybe because they were abandoned; they see children as a burden. When asked what they like best to do in a day they say “Pray, paint, and study.” I ask them, “When you are older, where would you like to have a home...near where you grew up or where your families were from?” Most of them say where they were from. Even all alone, they would go home. I ask, do you have anything you wish you could have here. (They are children so I was expecting something fun) They say a library and some desks please. I ask if they remember their parents, about 6 out of 90 raise their hands. “When did you last see your parents?” A girl of 15 says 1990 (13 years ago).

I explain to the lady who runs this place that my son was an orphan

Oh – She said – seemed sad for him

It is sad. I suppose because I am so close to him I try not to think about how sad his past was.

We visit a younger group of girls, they all have lovely, smiling faces. What have you done today I ask? “Got up, showered, prayed to God, had breakfast, and

studied.” They tell me they love to sing so I ask them for a song. They sing and clap in their language. I ask a translator what the song means. I realize it is Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. Oh! They sing again, this time in English. It’s one of the sweetest things I have ever heard.

They ask what I do – I explain. Then they tell me no one wants to be an actor. “Good choice,” I say, “it’s a silly life. A teacher is more important.” Again I ask, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Doctors, yes there are many hands for that. Teachers, yes. Mothers? None.

Here they learn Tamil. There are 248 letters to our 26. I tell them maybe they are smarter than me. One girl just smiles knowingly. I now ask the little ones where they want to live when they grow up. The little ones all want to stay here. If you could have anything here what would it be? Books and library are again the answer.

We walk to visit the babies and toddlers. “Don’t go off the path,” I am told. “It’s not de-mined yet.” My God, just a few feet away from all these children, there are land mines. It makes me so angry. I hear gorgeous chanting suddenly coming from the 12 year olds dorm. It’s an amazing sound. They sound like strong angels.



Tiny little kids are gathered in a doorway, like all kids that age. Just the sight of them makes you smile; they are so curious and playful. I’m the newest person so they are testing me out. Coming close and looking, then backing away. I’m not sure how to break the ice, so I draw a silly picture in my notebook and show it to them.

In local writing, one of the girls writes her name. She points proudly to some writing of hers next to the picture. “She’s telling you that’s her name.” We smile at each other and the other kids laugh, as all kids do. They laugh at just about anything when they’re being silly. It’s such a great moment. I almost forget they are orphans and this little building is their home. I notice some cribs in the room. Little babies. Their life begins here; this is a sad consequence of war.

As we walk out, Neill says they will be talking to UNICEF for desks and chairs. But UNHCR will also see what their own budget allows, so they can perhaps give a new kitchen. I didn’t see the kitchen. I think they were uncomfortable to show me their mud kitchen. It’s a very poor kitchen, difficult to make good food

everyday for all these kids. But these women are hard working. It's very hard to run this place right and take care of all these kids.

Next we visit INIYA VAZHVI ILLAM, a Voluntary Social Service Organization. It's a hostel and school for children with vision or hearing impairment and the physically handicapped. As we entered, we were met with ceremony. The children brought flowers and the other children marked our foreheads with ashes. There is a name for this prayer. Insert picture from Liba. We meet the project coordinators, teachers, secretary and other staff. 35 children here have vision problems, 33 children have hearing problems, and 2 children have physical handicaps. The children that met us when we came must have been deaf. I want to kick myself for not knowing sign language. Many of these children were born this way. However, they say some children went deaf from the bombing. Some children were born handicapped because many pregnant women had to give birth on the run when the fighting started...they had to leave them behind or died while giving birth to them. Traumatic birth for the mother can cause defects in the child.

Some of the blind kids were often tied to their parent's ankles as children. Some grew up without proper attention and have come here late so they are far behind in their studies. But I am told that the students are now doing very well with their studies.

We go to meet the children. I won't write much in front of them because I don't want to be rude. We speak to three young blind girls who have been brought forward. They are in their teens and only a few months ago were introduced to braille. "It is very exciting," one of the girls says. "Before I was here, I just sat at home. I could do nothing, just sit." One girl who looks very sad and the more shy of the group speaks up and says she lost her parents recently and was brought here just a few days ago. She says she is happy to be here, still, she seems alone and frightened.

These kids have had a tough time, one of the teachers says. "They were very scared and sensitive to the sounds of war and bombing." Someone says, "the fighting seems to have stopped." They speak about the cease fire. It is the first time they all smile. One of the girls has been asked to take a visit to Germany with an aid organization to "perform music." "Organ?" "Yes, I also sing." I congratulate her, she suddenly looks very proud.

A moment later a little boy is assisted up in his seat. "He is an orphan," they say. When he first came, he couldn't walk and he was urinating on himself. He has been here 1 year. They think he is 6, but his family was killed and no one knows his birthday. He has a



heartbreaking smile, a child anyone could easily love.

We are at an assembly now, and the program begins.



The lady who is going to Germany sings. Of the 30 or so young people on the floor, I wonder what all the deaf children think is happening. One boy looks about 10. He is deaf and has the most striking blue eyes.

Next is an English speech. He works so hard, struggling with the speech. The mother next to me sounds like she is crying. I don't want to turn and look. It's very

moving. His speech is on behalf of disabled people. On this Tamil New Year day there is hope for more job opportunities. Next, there is a dance by the deaf children. Lovely young ladies, all I can think of is how hard they are working to better themselves. It's pointed out to me that the teacher is behind us guiding them through the dance because they can't hear the music. I think they're amazing. We say good bye. All the little boys want to shake hands. I find out no one has funded the teacher's salaries since last December. OXFAM funded them before December. But now, everyone here is doing all this work with these children for no money. I am sure they are all poor themselves and it is not easy to do.

As we drive out and head to the UNHCR Office at *Mallari*. We pass many women in long sleeved men's shirts, sleeves rolled up and big belts cinched around their waists. It is explained to me they are LTTE cadre women, they are fighters. They have had hard military training. The suicide branch of the LTTE is called "Black Tigers" The highest rate of suicide bombers anywhere in the world are in Sri Lanka, half of them are women. I'm told that while the practice of suicide bombers may not have started in Sri Lanka, it has been a more prolific practice here than in any other country.

2 ½ hours of driving and we are now at the Mallavi compound. I'll be sleeping under UNHCR plastic tarp and a mosquito net. When you have a choice, it can be fun. I put my backpack down and join the others to eat. The conversation over dinner turns to Rosanna from Argentina, she works for UNICEF, she talks of child soldiers. "Do they have a lot – the LTTE?" I ask. "Put it this way, during conflict (war time) there was prisoner exchange and there was also a body exchange. 1/3 of the Tamil bodies, the dead soldiers, were under age."

Tuesday 5:25am, I awake to the sound of very loud roosters. We have coffee at 6:30am and are on the road by 7:00am. The talk in the car turns to many Japanese people working in Sri Lanka. Neill relates that 50 years ago, when the Japanese Government asked countries what reparation they wanted after the Second World War, the then Sri Lankan President, J R Jayawardena responded saying "nothing other than lasting friendship between our two countries". The Japanese Government was so impressed that it has supported Sri Lanka ever since, and it remains the biggest donor. Even in UNHCR, some Japanese staff members specially want to work in Sri Lanka because of this.

We drive past a temple and some shrines. Many people have stopped in this small village and there are a few old tractors covered in colorful plastic flower wreaths. "Don't look Angie." I do, of course. In the front of one of the old tractors there are 2 men hanging from hooks. I think at first, they are dead. They're not. The two men are hanging face down suspended by the hooks in their flesh. This Hindu ritual is called Parawa-Kavadi.

We drive out of the controlled area. Again, we past the LTTE check point. In the area called "*no man's land*," a man in a Red Cross tent still waits. We pass the Sri Lankan Army checkpoint onto a dirt road. There are small shops and life is slowing returning to normal. Nothing was here a year ago. We pass hundreds of bombed-out homes.

We meet the Jaffna UNHCR staff lead by Morgan, a lovely English woman. There is also a lady from Dublin called Joanna and a UN volunteer from Kosovo called Agron. There were more from all over the world and, of course, the many local staff who work with them.

Our first stop is a center called JSAC (The Jaffna Social Action Center).

The Jaffna Social Action Center was set up to protect the rights and well being of the most vulnerable internally displaced persons in Jaffna, women and children. Due to the conflict, thousands of women were left without their husbands. Now becoming the head of the household, it is their responsibility to provide for their families. There are many dangers and difficulties to face, including physical danger (many people view women on their own as "loose women"), social exclusion, poverty and human rights abuses by police and armed forces. JSAC is implementing many projects to enhance the lives of women and children affected by armed conflict. These include:

- *A safe house for victims of violence*
- *Income generation projects for female heads of household*
- *Awareness programs for teachers (on children's rights), IDPs/ returnees on human rights and values for living*
- *Human rights training for the police*
- *Mobile documentation clinic for replacing birth, death and marriage certificates*

- *Field protection units*
- *Start up of pre schools in returnee communities*
- *Program to reduce the effects of alcohol abuse*

UNHCR set it up and is now working with them. Two projects were approved in September and October for JSAC. One provides an information center and one a children's club. Both are running in JSAC with about 200 children attending the children's club, which is run on a daily basis. The second project approved on October 31st was an income generation project for approximately 60-70 widows from the Jaffna coastal areas. These women will be offered classes, training and support in starting income generation such as sewing and cooking activities. Many widows are here to learn teaching skills and vocational training. It is a way to bring them together.



This place is also to help the most vulnerable, who are mostly orphans and very poor children, 120 in total. I ask, "Are there many widows and orphans in this country?" "Oh yes, very many, so many." Although UNHCR started this organization, the goal is to make it self-sufficient so it can run itself. It also looks like UNDP will be working with them setting up small business. Also, USAID has been by for a visit, to possibly work together with JSAC. Suddenly, I can hear children singing.

They tell me more about JSAC and how they do a lot of interventions on domestic violence. There are 5 or 6 cases a week. Women come here because of abandonment or violence. What they offer the women is legal advice if they want it. They also accompany them to the police station and even sometimes give them a bed for the night. Recently JSAC is very happy that the police have started alerting them of cases at the police station. So, they are starting to work together successfully. There are cases of sexual and gender based violence along with beaten children.

They are also establishing pre schools, set up based on the convention on the rights of the child (click [here](#) for the full text).

95% of the women here speak Tamil. The police only speak *Sinhalese*, so often in cases of rape the women have ended up in prison for weeks until it is cleared up. There is a lot to be figured out in this area. SaveThe Children last year documented 57 children locked in prison for violence and they were actually the victims of violence.

Before I leave the JSAC, I am handed a package. The widows have made the sweetest little outfit for Maddox (my son). I don't know what to say.

We drive into the Muslim Quarter. They are the minority here in Sri Lanka, only 7% of the population. They had a very difficult time during the war because they were expelled from this area.



In 1990, the LTTE were suspicious that Muslims were giving the Sri Lankan army information. So the LTTE came in by force and gave them a few hours to pack a bag and go. The LTTE took Marriage Certificates and Birth Certificates. As the Muslim families evacuated, they were each allowed to take only 500 Rupees (\$5) with them and no jewelry. They were all evicted; the town was empty just hours after

the early morning announcement. The LTTE looted anything and everything they wanted. So here, it wasn't conflict, it was deliberate.



This was a primary school in 1988. Now some returnees are living in the rubble. We meet a group of Muslim men and they bring me to a Mosque. There they pray 5 times a day. They tell me they are nervous it will all happen again. But the main concern now is the children. He asks, "Without a house, where can they stay?"

One man tells me "They said we had 2 hours to leave, we were packing – my kids were packing. They came and said you have to leave now. It wasn't 2 hours to just pack, but 2 hours total to pack and cross out of the border. "You've run out of time, move!" There was 12 years of displacement. And only now, 12 years later, they are returning.

The Sri Lankan Army is here now, to stop more looting from taking place. But there doesn't seem much point, nothing is here. Even the doors have been ripped off any standing walls.

We visit a family. There is a grandmother, a couple and a child. The couple was here when the LTTE kicked them out. The mother of the 11 month old baby was 8 years old when she began to run. They are living off dry rations from the government. Once a month they receive 660 Rupees about \$6 US dollars. They are a very kind family. They explain this is not their home -- the family home was flattened. This building is a friend's who has not yet returned. They are in this home because it has four walls and a good enough roof.

Walking down the road with the men, I remember other people are at war with each other, or at least it is certainly what it seems like if you watch the news. Nothing is said about that. It doesn't feel that way here.

We go to another home. A group of men meet us at the door. One is rocking a very small baby in his arms. About 8 children run up. They are visibly poor but happy. The men tell us how much the children are studying. All of the children were born in displacement.

We say goodbye and thank the men for giving us their time. We arrive at a checkpoint. We are suddenly stopped by Army officials. Our antenna was about to hit the electrified barbed wire.

We drive 45 minutes out to the islands, to visit with fishing families. I am told the military controls the sea so the fishermen have limited access to the waters.

We visit a family who has recently returned after years of displacement. The father has very sad eyes. There is a young boy. They say of him. "The child he goes on his own." He looks like he has suffered trauma or brain damage. He is one of twins, the other child died of a fever during displacement. Another child of theirs, the eldest, died during an aerial attack. This place was their home before the war. In 1985 they had to leave. In 1986 they tried to come back. In 1990 they had to leave again. Last August they came back. They humbly apologized, "Our house was not always like this."



The boy (the slow one) gets on a rope swing and starts swinging back and forth behind his mother as she and I continue talking, "Only thing that makes him happy," she says. Another woman, a grandmother, comes with another child a little girl with special needs. They feel it is a result of stress and bombing. "She was okay when she was born. At 3 months old she got a fever, there

was nothing we could do for her. We were on the run at the time." The girl breathes very heavy. "We can't put her head down; she hardly can sleep at night."

They talk about the boy – he often wanders and gets lost. The mother says, "My other son who died was very good at talking to people. I am sorry he is not here for your visit."

The little girl starts shaking and her hands close up into tight fists, the mother and grandmother start to massage her hands, mindlessly, as they continue to talk. As if they had done it a thousand times before.

UNHCR is talking about planning to start mobile clinics and promises to keep the families informed of any progress. Some NGO's were helping these families but they had to leave, most likely to an emergency country like Iraq. There is a hospital a short boat ride away, but they are not allowed to cross those waters.

We walk down the road to another family. A man and his wife pull out mats to sit on. He shows his documents from MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) "One day I

was fishing -- the Navy came towards me -- they fired at me. The pieces of the explosion came towards me and I fell back." He got caught in the nets on fire. "I was in a coma for 3 months. For some time, my family did not know where I was." He was found in the hospital. The wife says she was able to cook food for him, but had no bus money to get the food to him. The eldest son collected and sold rocks to get bus money, so she could get his dinner to the hospital.

Much hope for this country
Come this far to have a ceasefire
I was encouraged to meet so many people
So committed to the end of this war
Ready to work hard to rebuild their homes

For the covered hand, he explains, he has had plastic surgery twice. His other arm, feet and legs were also very badly burned. "I was the bread winner, I don't have any income for my family. I was a clean man," he says. "I used to shave but I need 20 Rupees for a razor. I don't have it."

One of the daughters was going to be given a sewing machine, but it never arrived. The son, 24, is away learning about making fibre glass boats. "They are all in training, working hard but no one is earning money.

Disability payment from the government is 210 Rupees a month, \$2 US dollars." He wants to try to fish again. "I have the will but my wounds keep opening. I love the sea. I was born on the sea. I walked in after the fire. It hurt and bubbled my skin. I washed but next morning the scars were like wounds again."

He says when they left in 1986 they could hardly take anything. The man tried to come back once to get some of the things, but they shot at him. "When the bombing started and we first ran the children were 4, 6, 8, and 13 years old. We had a very tough time. We were sleeping on street corners with our children. During that time the girl came of age so it was that much harder for her. Finally after weeks, we ended up in a school building for a while. Then they helped us transfer again by boat. We had to find a new place. It was dangerous and scary for the kids, there was much walking. We tried to do most at night so it was not as hot. We had fatigue and some skin disease. Another daughter had pain and had to be admitted to a hospital. It was a poor hospital. We had to cut down a tree to make a bed for her. All medicines were in short supply, we had to go very far and get medicine."

The wife says simply says, "We are finding it very hard to live. Sometimes we think maybe we starve -- maybe we will set fire to ourselves. Maybe it will be better somewhere else." The kids tell us, "No, we have to stay strong. It will get better, but I don't know when." What do you say to a family like this? The father continues to pull out documents from an old canvas bag. "We feel like beggars, we have no family to help us. The brother of the woman won't help. "If you do

not help when your family is starving, what is a brother? Family are supposed to help each other.”

We walk a bit further down the road into a big cement structure. A group of men women and children, “We left this area in 1985. We come back to nothing. What we need most is medical attention. There is a school for the kids. We are grateful, but it is far, 200 km walking. The women can weave but have no tools for baskets and mats. In this area we had a large factory.” “Where?” I ask. “There” – I look over at a flat cement floor with only the very little remains of what used to be a building around it. “We lost everything to the war.” They speak as the others have, about a need for more medical aid and greater access to the sea to fish. As we leave to go, an old man with brown eyes turning light cloudy blue from age, summons me over. With his wooden cane. He wants to tell me something. He shows me his hand, it’s shaking. He tells me he would like to see a doctor. He says it is getting harder to eat and other basic physical needs. I explain he unfortunately has to wait for UNHCR to arrange a mobile clinic and that I am told, it will be soon. I think I forgot to take my hat off. Is that rude? I realize he probably can’t see anyway. Still, I know that the next time I am summoned by an elder, I will do so immediately.

We drive to the North Coast about a 1 ½ hours to the VVT Hospital. The doctor, Mylerumperumal. I have heard much about him. He was born here and came back here 4 years ago. He studied medicine in India. His home, his sisters and his brothers homes have all been totally destroyed. He joined the ICRC (Red Cross) a few years ago. In the 1990s he was the only doctor in the Wannu. Today he averages 82 patients a day. He is the only doctor. He has only 5 nurses and one assistant. He works round the clock. Takes off only from 4 to 6:30pm. He sleeps in the hospital.

The doctor works closely with UNHCR. In most operations UNHCR has funding shortages but in this program, the Sri Lankan program, they have enough funds. It is not a large operation by UNHCR standards. Because they have had sufficient funding for basic programs, they have been able to financially assist this doctor with his hospital. Not with much, but with some basic necessary things.

The problem here is not money but how and when it can be distributed. So many different people must agree. So many politics. The HALO trucks stuck in customs. The government money for returning people to rebuild – both held up.

We take a walk around the hospital. There are signs posted in the waiting room of Land Mind Awareness, Malaria Awareness and Health For Pregnant Women. There is also a UNICEF poster which reads.

*Many things we need, can wait, the child cannot.
Now is the time his bones are being formed his blood is being made,*

*His mind is being developed
To him we cannot say tomorrow
His name
is today*

Gabriela Mistral
Nobel prize winning
Chilean Poet

As we walk around I recognise the doctor's charm and charisma. He complains about nothing. He seems to find only solutions. He has what he calls "a news garden" "We didn't have enough money for a library" he says, "It's a small room with newspapers on a table." He takes us into his operation center, it is very poor. It's a wooden table with an old leather sheet over it. Blue and white checkered cloth to cushion the head. "How do you get supplies?" I ask. "The government, when they can - and when they can't", he smiles playfully, "we beg, borrow or steal." In 2000, he was not allowed to bring in anaesthetic. Can you imagine those operations? Amputations with no anaesthetic.

I notice a poster. It's a picture of a little boy holding a rose. It says, "*Kindness is the first way to live.*" We enter the children's ward. The beds are old, rusted and broken. The doctor says, "We try to make do."

I meet a boy. He has had a fever for the last 21 days. Typhoid. "They don't give us medicine for that," the doctor says. But he says with a smile. "I got it." The girl on the bed next to him has an abscess on her breast. The doctor thinks it's from a snake or scorpion bite.

We enter the labor room, the doctor has put up beautiful pictures. Many are of babies with wings. He found them in another hospital and borrowed them. But the beds in the room would make any western woman cringe. I would be terrified to have a baby here. Amazingly, however, this doctor could make anyone feel at ease, even here. He is 62 years old and has the spirit of 16. He has so little funds and so many patients. It's a huge burden. He doesn't make money. He is a great doctor. So qualified that he could be anywhere, but he is here. More people like him, and the world would be a better place.

He takes us down a tunnel. Small bats hang from the rafters. He explains this was an underground bunker built by the LTTE. He plans to use it as a Cancer Hospital. "Radiation *units* can be used underground but they are very expensive. So this a dream."

Before we leave, he shows us pumps donated by ICRC and UNHCR. He explains they have clean water now. Before, it was not safe. I try to imagine a hospital with no clean water. There is a sign painted on the wall, it reads, *Respect and Reverence not only to temples but also to hospitals.*

We head to a government welfare center, The Supermadam Welfare Center, named after the village. It is still strange to me none the less.

We drive along the ocean. Kones, the local UNHCR man driving, points out India is only 22km away across the water. There is something very peaceful about Kones. I have been watching him for the last 2 days. I met his wife today who also works for UNHCR. Maybe what I notice is traditional to a Hindu couple. But they are a very lovely couple.

We reach the center. These families are displaced. Their old homes are in high security areas, so they are unable to return. We walk in. It is like a small shanty town. All small homes (shelters) are very close together. In a ½ square kilometer there are 120 huts. I meet with two women who have been here since 1996. “The government gives small assistance and in 2001 we got assistance from UNHCR also, to make a more permanent structure. This is better than before if you can imagine.”

She wants me know that she doesn't want to complain, they are very grateful. “It is just very hard,” she says. “More families are coming all the time, water and sanitation facilities are limited. We have limited toilets. 6 toilets for 700 people.” Obviously I know she is not talking about proper plumbing toilets but designated holes in the ground that fill up when over used. She tells me men use the outside toilets when they can, when they work (fishing). They try to save what they can for women. They received non food items, like buckets for water storage, soap, kitchen and cooking utensils, once long ago. They receive government assistance for food but the housing assistance they don't get because they have no land. “GTZ was providing mobile water assistance but their assistance programme was up and that job is left for the government. But it seems the government doesn't have the resources. Everyday when our husbands go to fish they have to get a pass from the government. This is not always easy so they cannot always fish.

“There is no clinic here.” She says “So many flies. They came once to spray but have stopped.” I had noticed the flies. I was trying not to swat the flies off my face while I talking to her. I didn't want to be rude to her in her home. “Hygiene is the problem here,” the mother says. “The children get sick.” She like most people here, has a very humble – elegant way about her.

We say goodbye. As I walk out, I think, as I have before, when I leave a place like this, I will be gone from here in a few days back home, a fully stocked fridge, a beautiful house and able to give my son all that he needs. These women will still be here. This continues, and when you read this, whoever you are, that lady will still be there and so many more just like her.

On the way home, we pass a busload of families. They have painted on the back of the bus, "God is refuge for us."

I met many widows, many orphans; they are the biggest casualties of war. Homes can be rebuilt, but so many have lost family members. The poor and vulnerable don't have proper access to the law.

Hearing so much about human rights here, I decided upon leaving, to personally support the Sri Lankan National Human Rights Commission. It has been agreed upon in the peace talks by both parties that the Human Rights Commission will take the lead. So I will personally be offering the HRC any support they need, financial or otherwise, to have what they need to be strong and fully functioning. This is that very important, delicate time in Sri Lanka - where a country at war has declared a cease fire after decades of fighting. This is the time to support them and everyone involved in the road to peace. The people I have met are very committed, I believe, and I know UNHCR believes that the only way for this country to properly come together again is to rebuild a strong foundation of respect for basic human rights.

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