

A Spirited Journey!

R&R Newsletter #2 – December 2009



Note from the Board of Directors

Dear fellow R&R volunteers and well-wishers,

Reconcile and Rebuild (R&R) Sri Lanka Network is happy to report its successful participation in two projects – helping students in IDP camps who are sitting for O/L exams this month and helping needy pre-school children in Seenigama. You can read more about the projects here, and we hope you will share in our excitement as we begin the journey towards achieving R&R's vision of working across ethnic and religious boundaries to foster mutual respect, trust, and friendship among all communities in Sri Lanka and its Diaspora to build a better future for all its citizens.

We are also happy to report that we have a number of worthy projects in the pipeline, some of which are described in this newsletter. More excitingly a number of R&R members have undertaken projects on their own in the Spirit of R&R and we share some of those stories here. If you have such stories to share with the Network, we will be happy to include them in the next newsletter.

In the October newsletter, we informed you that we had incorporated the R&R Network in California as a not-for-profit corporation. We are now in the process of seeking U.S. federal tax-exempt status, which we hope to get by April 2010. If approved, all donor contributions could be retroactively tax-deductible. Volunteers in the U.K. have informed us of their interest in forming an R&R chapter there, so if you are interested in working on that, let us know and we will connect you.

R&R is exploring the possibility of collaborating with the Foundation of Goodness and the Sarvodaya Movement – both trusted and established organizations in Sri Lanka – to assist them in their work related to helping our country reconcile and rebuild. As we ramp up on undertaking more collaborative projects in Sri Lanka, the need for finances and volunteer participation is increasing. In the upcoming festive season, we would appreciate it greatly if you can make a donation to R&R to support the projects we plan to undertake. All 100% of your donations will go towards supporting the project you specify. We have separate funding for the minimal administrative expenses we incur.

We wish you all a joyous festive season and a peaceful New Year!

Ongoing Projects Update

1. O-Level Students in IDP Camps Receive Supplies

This project, the first for R&R, was to support 2,500 students at the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps who are sitting for their O-Level exam in December 2009. We supplied a range of stationery material at a cost of Rs. 661,475 (U.S.\$5,752). This project was initiated by R&R volunteer Tennyson Rodrigo, and undertaken in collaboration with the Colombo Tamil Sangam Society. The supplies were delivered to students in the camps on November 8th. Pictures below show supplies being loaded onto lorries in Colombo to be taken to the camps and volunteers sorting and packaging supplies.



As an extension to this project the R&R core group explored the possibility of supplying a nutritional drink to the students close to the time of their examination. After an evaluation of the cost and logistics of this project we decided against proceeding with it mainly because of funds constraints. However one of our volunteers has since offered to fund the entire cost of this project subject to the logistical feasibility of getting the nutritional drink to about 2000 students sitting for the examination on December 11th. Our profound gratitude to the R&R volunteer for undertaking this project and wish him well.

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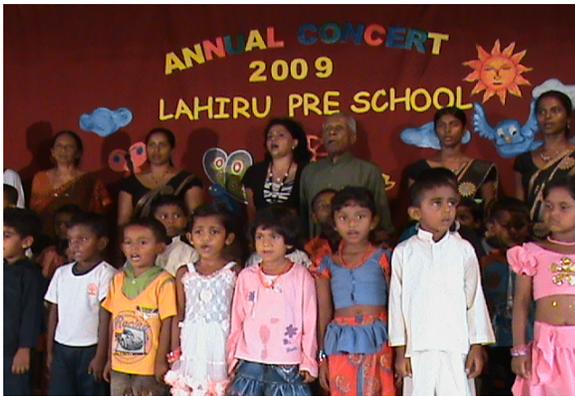
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Ongoing Projects Update (Continued)

2. School Supplies from R&R for Lahiru Pre-school

California-based R&R member Ranjan Swaminathan initiated this project, to provide school bags and other supplies for the new school year to 58 needy children attending Lahiru pre-school in Seenigama in the Galle District. This project was successfully implemented in collaboration with the Foundation of Goodness (FoG) at a cost of approximately \$1,500. R&R members Tennyson & Vinitha Rodrigo officially donated the school kits funded by R&R to the children at Lahiru Pre-school in the presence of FoG staff, villagers and parents. Below is a photograph taken at the event where the school supplies were handed over to the children.



An R&R volunteer donated Rs. 5,000/- to meet the medical bills of a needy elderly gentleman in the village. An additional amount of Rs.100/- was also given to 50 children with the objective of making the children in turn donate part of this amount to other, more needy children in their community, preferably to a needy child from a different ethnic community. Another illustration of R&R volunteers acting to reconcile and rebuild the country.

Upcoming Projects Update

3. The Inter-Ethnic Family Partnership

The project, also known as the 20-20-20 Project, is designed to financially assist and write letters to 20 families from the three major communities who have been impacted by the ethnic conflict. Impacted Tamil families from the north and displaced Muslim families in Puttlam have been identified, and once affected Sinhala families are identified and project sponsors (donors and multi-lingual letter-writers) found, this project is

expected to begin early next year. The project is expected to cost a total of \$1,500 per month for 6 months.

4. Online Learning Institutes

This long term, resource intensive project is being formulated to achieve the following objectives:

- Provide additional opportunities for Sri Lankan youth, thought leaders, and expatriates of different ethnicities to *engage* with one another to achieve common goals.
- *Educate* and empower youth to further develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities on topics that interest them.
- Provide incentives for youth to *collaborate* across ethnic lines to become employable.

We are identifying potential partners to pilot this project, initially in the South and North. Our goal is to kick off the pilot program in the first half of 2010.

How to Initiate an R&R Project and Implement It

The R&R approach is to collaborate with established and reputed organizations to undertake joint projects with the R&R spirit built into them. If you wish to contribute to the above-mentioned projects or have ideas to initiate and lead such collaborative efforts, please let us know. Remember, the R&R spirit is to support all of us to do what each of us can do best.

If you have any ideas, please email other R&R volunteers (see website for email addresses) or call 650-283-5107 in California or 9411-2573895 in Sri Lanka.

Donations and Funding

R&R's first year project funding need is estimated to be up to Rs. 50 million. If you wish to contribute, please send checks payable to: Reconcile and Rebuild, P.O. Box 784, Palo Alto, CA 94302, USA. R&R expects to receive U.S. tax-exempt certification in the coming months, and expects to have a bank account established soon in Sri Lanka to receive donations in Rupee denominations.

How to Contribute to the Newsletter

If you have thoughts or articles to share, please email: editor@reconcileandrebuild.org (next issue will be in February 2010). This issue also carries travel notes from U.S. based R&R volunteer Ranjan Swaminathan who made a recent visit to Sri Lanka (see Attachment A).

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Attachment A: R&R Volunteer Essays and Views

Saluting Our Heroes: My Recent Sri Lankan Travels

by Shiva Ranjan Swaminathan

This was my second trip to Sri Lanka since the Tsunami of December 2004. On my first trip, I heard the tragedies of the Tsunami, along with the yearning and hope for rebuilding after the disaster. During my recent visit, I once again experienced the aftermath of the Tsunami, as well as the aftermath of the man-made tragedy Sri Lanka has lived with for the past three decades – and once again I saw the hope and courage of many heroes dedicating themselves to rebuild not only their own lives but the lives of others around them. This write-up is dedicated to saluting them. Because of heroes like them, I hold great hope and optimism that we as country will once again be the glittering pearl of the Indian Ocean!

During the trip I traveled to Vavuniya, Batticaloa, and Seenigama, and I made these travels with two acquaintances, Herath and Dean. The three of us had different ethnicities and upbringing, but after the five day road trip we had the bonding of brothers. We talked a lot during the overnight journey between towns: the commonalities of our religions, how each of us was wounded by the ethnic conflict and our resolve to overcome them. Dean was asked to leave his home in Mannar with 24-hour notice in 1990. I had loved ones burned to death in Colombo in 1983; I was also impacted when someone, out of malice, informed the police that I was a terrorist, and I was taken into custody at midnight with a bag over my head from my home in Colombo where I had lived all my life. My home was safeguarded during the 1983 riots by my Sinhalese friends and Hamuduruvas from the neighboring temple. Sharing these tragic and uplifting stories increased our resolve to try harder so that history does not repeat itself.

We talked about the commonalities of religion, and how each religious doctrine may be looked at within the context of the time and place of its origins and its teachers. At the end of the trip each of us had to admit that there were greater commonalities amongst the four major religions of the land than differences, and each of us was in fact a Buddhist – a Muslim - a Christian – and a Hindu. It was a powerful self realization!

On the trip we heard many stories of lost lives and prolonged human suffering. A father falling over an infant child and dying; a star student's legs severed by a shell and bleeding to death; guns turned on civilians; girls and women raped; a man who rebuilt his life after severe leg injuries in the Tsunami. The stories go on, first hand accounts. Who is responsible for these tragedies is a question that no one has a good answer to. The question is not worthy of in depth analysis for folks like me who choose to focus on learning from the past, but yet always looking forward to do our part to rebuild lives of individuals and to reconcile the country for a better future.

The Heroes We Met in Vavuniya

We met about 20 to 30 IDP families within the camps and living in and around Vavuniya town. They had undergone unimaginable hardship, but were yet hopeful of recovering from their tragedies to build better lives for their remaining families. There was a young man who lost his 'high achieving and charming' brother to a shell, and he himself was an inmate in the camps until October. When we met him, he had just been released from the camps but he was going back to the camps as a volunteer to help the others (he was being paid a small stipend).



This un-named hero with his grief stricken mother and a picture of his brother

We also met a godly elderly gentleman, well respected by the community in Vavuniya, doing his level best with help from others, to bring essential supplies and funds for families within the camp over the past six to nine months. We also met half-a-dozen dedicated and courageous individuals working at the local branch of the Sarvodaya, and SEED, a local NGO. We marveled at their sheer

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Attachment A: R&R Volunteer Essays and Views

dedication and one-mindedness, and pledged to assist them with their truly humanitarian work. We also encountered some happy children planting trees at a school close to the IDP camps -- our young heroes trying to make a difference in their own small way.

Happy children planting and nurturing trees at a school on the way to the IDP camps – our young heroes



We met families inside the camps who had lost small children and spouses, and wives who said that their husbands were being held captive in the 'former combatant's' camps. We promised to assist them by writing letters and guiding them to rebuild better and more peaceful lives. One of the young ladies knew the Tamil poet Auvayar's Aathisoodi and Kondraivendhan verses by heart and agreed to be the teacher for the children in the camp. Her smiling face and 'can-do' attitude was so powerful and overwhelming. Another lady agreed to study the teachings of Lord Buddha and learn from this great sage.

Heroes we met in Batticaloa

We visited the Sarvodaya center in Batticaloa and met with about 100 students who were being trained on vocational trades such as cell-phone repair, aluminum workmanship, and motorcycle repair. Their energy and desire to learn was amazing; their plans to set up new businesses around the country were breathtaking. Their vocational teacher brought tears to our eyes when he said the greatest joy he feels these days is when his students tell him that they are gainfully employed. This teacher was highly respected and just amazing!



Heroes we met at Seenigama

We met children from multiple schools in the local village. We also conversed with a man who was severely injured by the Tsunami and now making a living as a boatman to take pilgrims to the Devalaya located 500 feet into the sea.



The boatman, in sarong, being helped to take the boat to sea

We also met an amazing man, Kushil Gunasekera, and his team who helped rebuild the Seenigama village after the Tsunami. He is hailed as a true visionary and leader nationally and internationally for his work in Seenigama. Kushil is now embarking on another daunting task to build a Learning and Empowerment Institute, modeled after his Seenigama experience, at a location yet to be determined in Northern Sri Lanka, truly a work of the Divine!

What do all our Heroes have in Common?

We did not hear any one of our heroes look back and blame others for their plight – not to us at least. They were all focused on rebuilding a better future for them and those around them. They were more focused on others, and putting into action their own values and skills to help one person at a time – a truly spiritual realization for us, and their actions sparked an urge in our minds too!

Editor's Note: The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and not those of the R&R Network or its Directors. We encourage all volunteers to share experiences and perspectives openly and honestly in the spirit of R&R.

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