

— Tsunami Disaster —

In Sri Lanka, A Relief Effort With No Relief

by **Andrew Bast**

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Andrew Bast, a freelance writer from Astoria, flew to Colombo, Sri Lanka shortly after the December 26th earthquake and tsunami that killed at least 46,000 people on the island nation and more than 156,000 overall. He has spent time with relief organizations in the capital city, where supplies pour in but must be shipped out to hard-hit areas.

The Women's International Center is surrounded by an eight-foot wall of concrete bricks, but Monday the iron gate at the street remained open all day long. Just before four o'clock, children played tennis outside and storm clouds threatened when a Nawani rice truck backed alongside the auditorium and five men, two without shoes, shouldered 50-pound bags inside.

In the midst of what has been called the largest relief effort in history, nothing happens all at once. Thousands of helping hands come from all corners of the globe, from heads of international aid organizations to volunteers selfless enough to work for the lives of unknown victims.

And on Guildford Crescent, in a residential neighborhood of Colombo, Sri Lanka, the complexities of putting together help for 1,000 families came into focus last Wednesday and Thursday. While United Nations Development Program members carted trucks of water east and the international community pledged millions of dollars in aid, a local organization in Colombo instantly transformed its mission to deal with the crisis.

"We are not a physical recovery agency."



In Colombo, volunteers work around the clock to pack food and medicine for delivery to coastal areas ravaged by the tsunami.
(photos by Maria Dolores Bermeo)

The FCE receives funding for its research from donors in the United Kingdom, Australia, Norway and Germany, and with their endorsement, the foundation has redirected its resources toward relief efforts, Hurulle said. And while the United States has pledged \$350 million in aid and the influence of former Presidents Bush and Clinton to help raise more money, Hurulle is skeptical. "They might say the money is coming, but we cannot foresee any of it coming to us. But we can hope."

In a single day, the FCE solicited its field

The staff consisted mostly of volunteers; some ended up in the center packing boxes only 72 hours after they had been eyewitness to the tragedy's destruction.

"I just came back from Unawatuna on the south coast, so I'm ready to do something useful," said Karen Whiting, a Canadian who works for a local NGO. "I was on the second floor of a hotel. The water just rose, a series of five waves, and then it pulled far into the bay. It pulled so far out that the bay emptied."

"There were fridges, stoves, pianos, coming in with the tide when it smashed into the hotel again," she said. "Beds, clothes, everything. I saw the bodies washing back onto shore." The next morning, volunteers waited on the steps of the center, saying that more medical supplies were on the way. And suddenly, out of nowhere, the next truck pulled into the parking lot, greeted by cheers and smiles and rejoicing cell phone calls.

"Everything is a little haywire," said Dhivya Siranesan, who also works at FCE and spent the afternoon coordinating the unloading of the truck. Then she turned and coordinated the volunteers to load the truck.

The truck backed carefully under the driveway's arches. The covered, wooden bed was painted yellow and red; inside it was turquoise. In 40 minutes, about 20 volunteers, in two chains, handed bag after bag from hand to hand, until the truck was loaded. They pulled out, headed for Ampara. The last of the three trucks off, filled with aid.

"We hope our contribution in our own small way will help the victims who have

measured quantities of rice. Others unpacked the boxes of powdered milk, and spread them across the stage. In a corner, three more volunteers dumped exactly two bowls of ground tea into a plastic bag, evacuating any extra air. Volunteers taped inch-square labels detailing the contents of each finished bag.

"Water is an essential," said Maria Bermeo, a research coordinator for FCE. Though most of the contents required water (tea, rice, milk), and reports of only dirty and possibly contaminated water running

administration for the Foundation for Co-existence, a non-governmental organization focusing on conflict resolution for the rebel group of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the government of Sri Lanka, between whom civil war has raged for the last 20 years. "But as soon as this happened, we knew we would change, and for a while this is what we will do."

Here, in the capital city, unspeakable tragedy has dressed the streets in white flags. Trishaws, the three-wheeled taxis waiting for passengers on every corner, fly them from wooden posts. And turning that grief into much-needed assistance has proved a daunting task. Banners announcing drop spots hang from trees and are plastered to the front of high-end department stores. Without a doubt there's a will, but it's not so easy to come up with a way.

chased supplies, rounded up volunteers and in a matter of hours assembled 1,000 aid packages, ready to travel to three specific areas of the country: Ampara, Trincomalee and Batticaloa, all cities immediately across the island on the battered East coast.

"There's a big run on water," Hurulle said. "People are boiling water in their houses, bottling it and sending it."

The volunteers, with a combination of Sinhala (one of Sri Lanka's two national languages), English and Spanish, as well as a lot of hand gestures, transformed the auditorium of the center into a makeshift factory. Along a wall, bags of rice and sugar were stacked and faced long, 60-pound bags of tea, pouches of salt and cartons of powdered milk.

Bustling around the stage, several volunteers filled plastic bags with meticulously

areas, no one at the operation could say with any certainty who, if anyone, was getting water to the three towns.

It remained unclear what they'd find in the affected regions when the goods were delivered. Local news outlets reported varying accounts of availability and safety of water throughout the affected areas.

Over the course of the evening, vans pulled under the center's covered driveway. At first they brought loads of medical supplies, and later, wrapped in brown canvas bags, huge orders of sarongs.

The iron chandeliers hanging in the auditorium flickered on, some of the bulbs burnt out, some of them missing altogether. All the while, metal fans spun, cooling the sweaty volunteers. And it wasn't until 7 p.m. that the first refreshments—Sprite, water and crackers—arrived for them.

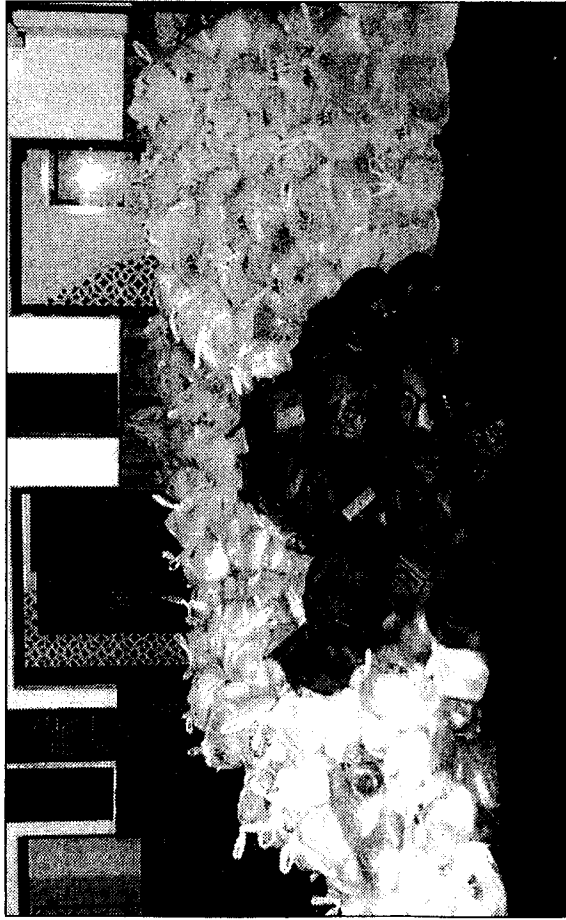
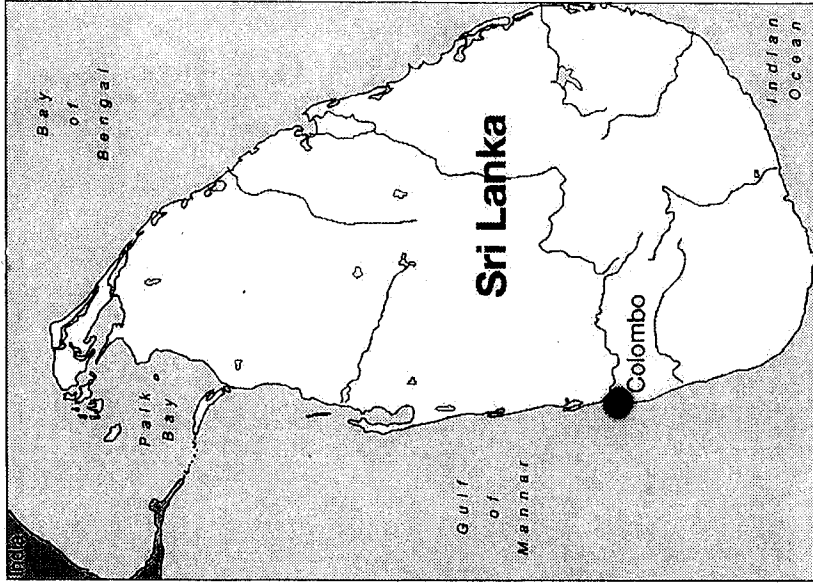
Piled against the wall in place of the dried milk that, by now, had been packed into white plastic bags, were boxes of syringes, plastic jugs of capsules of Cloxacillin (an antibiotic), plastic pouches of sanitary napkins, boxes of surgical masks, rolls of surgical gauze, boxes of Diclofenac sodium tablets (a painkiller) and bottles of Beta-dine, microbicidal solution. All of this would be delivered in bulk, straight to a hospital.

By nightfall, the stage and most of the floor was filled with 20-pound white plastic bags, their handles knotted, like bunny ears pointing toward the ceiling, ready to be shipped out.

small way, at least," Hurulle said.

Later in the afternoon, spilled rice and sugar had been swept into neat piles in the corners of the auditorium. The room reeked of sweat. Crows filled the parking lot, feeding on the spilled bags outside. Only three bags of sugar and two bags of tea remained, thousands of pounds, packed and shipped.

The following night the iron gate of the center was still open, a reddish glow coming from inside, the next shipment in the works.



Bags of supplies fill the Women's International Center before they are delivered.