

## **PHE'S FIRST JOURNEY TO VAHARAI**

January 2005

In mid January I met with my nephew Thamby's Colombo neighbours Mahain & Gowrie who told me that the east coast, which had been the most severely devastated, had been neglected by the Government and the major NGO's.

Mahain and Gowrie belong to the Chinmaya Organisation (a charitable organization already established in Sri Lanka). They had organized many Medical teams of volunteers from USA, England, and Malaysia to assist in the relief effort.

After speaking with them, I volunteered to travel to the area to assess the situation and to help in whatever way I could. A meeting was arranged for me with an LTTE colonel in charge of Vaharai and Trincomalee area.

From my previous trip with the Red Cross to Galle and other southern villages, I already knew what was needed and bought medical supplies, sleeping mats, buckets, mosquito prevention items, milk powder, baby food, toiletries, toys, etc., I also bought big rolls of plastic for groundsheets as I knew the tents were flooded. These were very well received.

The day shopping at the Pettah markets with my sister Robbie was a nightmare – hot, crowded, noisy, and chaotic and I felt overwhelmed.

In contrast the market closer to home proved more friendly and cheaper. We were befriended by a stall holder who helped us shop and get the best prices. He put someone else in to manage his stall while he accompanied us over several days, for no personal gain. After contributing to the micro economy of that market, we were recognized by all the stall holders who treated us with great kindness, offering cold drinks and carrying parcels. Some of them wept and hugged us with gratitude.

I set off at 2 a.m. with an Interpreter and driver in a van laden with supplies, only to break down 2 hours later at Pinnewalla! We had stopped for a tea break (one of many) and couldn't re-start the van. After much head scratching I suggested the starter motor could be the problem – imagine a nurse from Sydney peering under the bonnet! After a face- saving time, they agreed. The time at the truck stop was scary – I was surrounded by truck drivers, none able to speak English, who were curious of a white woman in a van with two men. We managed to jump start the vehicle and returned to Colombo.

I set off again the next night, making the 8 hour trip in the same by van to Vaharai to meet up with the doctors. After traversing the river by punt (the only means of crossing in that area) I toured five camps set up by the TRO with help from Oxfam and other agencies. The camps were crowded with well over 8,000 people, with the tents already badly damaged by flooding. I also toured the yet-to-be commissioned hospital which had been almost completely destroyed. My presence (and presents!) was well received by the locals.

When I was in the first camp at Vattava with the Malaysian and American medical teams, another medical team drove in (who turned out to be NZ Aid) to service the same camp. Yet another medical team had been there in the morning. This was causing conflict and dissention amongst the teams who were suffering from lack of local direction, with no clear idea of where to go.

Thinking I was an official, they all approached me to sort out the situation which had arisen where different medical aid groups would converge on the same camp on the same day at the same time. Most teams had been traveling from Batticloa daily, with others housed locally in the sole remaining house. I felt there needed to be a central control location and I decided to try and sort something out as I was the only foreigner who had been there before and had the appointment pre-arranged with the Colonel.

I took along the paramedic from NZ Aid whom I felt had a lot to offer and the interpreter and met with the LTTE colonel in the one large building remaining – the school house. We discussed the problems and I was able to negotiate a central control point in the partially destroyed hospital (which had been awaiting commission at the time of the Tsunami). I had noticed that there was one building in the hospital complex which could be used so we agreed to set up a clinic on the ground floor and accommodation for the NGOs and a central command on the upper floor.

The lack of hospital facilities was brought home in a graphic way shortly afterwards when we were driving back to the school and an elderly man hailed the van and was obviously in distress. On examination we found he had a hard mass in his abdomen, infection and a gaping wound. He had been operated on in early December and the sutures had not been removed and were causing the infection.

We set up a makeshift examination table in the back of the van, removed the sutures, cleaned the wound, re-sutured, gave antibiotics and sent him on his way – an old man with a toothless smile and very grateful.

The local NGO, the TRO had taken responsibility for feeding the medical teams and all the people in the camps. The food was nothing more than rice, dhal, tea and sugar. There were no vegetables or fruit – the gardens had all been destroyed by the salt water. I was amazed at the order and decorum of the refugees when supplies were delivered. There was a real sense of community and caring for each other.

Much later that night I traveled back to Colombo with a brief to organize the setting up of a medical facility for Vaharai. Even before the Tsunami there was no power in the area so my shopping list included a commercial strength generator as well as further medical supplies, cots and a satellite phone.