

A great leveler: Sri Lanka's factions deal with the tsunami

by [Paul Jeffrey](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

When Nadarajah Arulnathan visits his church at Pasikudah, he puts on a surgical mask because along the way he must pass rotting bodies tangled in the underbrush. They can't be removed because of the landmines, washed loose from a nearby military base and scattered across the land. The church sanctuary is battered but still stands. Not so the dozens of houses that once stood around it; they are simply gone, their foundations mute testimony to the time when people ate greasy Sri Lankan hoppers (pancakes) with their fingers and yelled down the street to tell their children that it was time to come in. No one yells at anyone now.

If Arulnathan, a Methodist pastor, wants to visit members of his flock, he goes down the main highway to the Pentecostal church or just past it to a government-run school. He worked day and night with other local leaders to organize those shelters and find food, clothes and medicine for the more than 3,000 people living there. It took several days for assistance from the outside to reach this isolated stretch of villages along the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, those who had something shared with those who didn't. Most of the dead here and in nearby Batticaloa were buried hastily, with Arulnathan and other religious leaders performing a quick interfaith service at the edge of a mass grave.

Arulnathan lost 19 relatives to the tsunami, including a sister and her three daughters, but more than a week passed before he found time to visit his family and share the grief. Like many Sri Lankans, he's a wounded healer, too busy to mourn.

This island nation has had more than its share of tears in recent years. Ethnic tensions between the majority Sinhalese in the south and the minority Tamils in the north and east have fueled two decades of civil war in which some 65,000 died. A ceasefire brokered by Norway took effect in 2002, but peace talks floundered in 2003. In the months leading up to the tsunami, many Sri Lankans felt their country was slipping back toward war.

At the same time, a growing Buddhist nationalist movement began pushing to make Sri Lanka an officially Buddhist state and to criminally punish religious conversions. The Buddhist extremists, by all accounts few in number but well connected, harass evangelical Christians in particular, throwing stones and even burning the churches of a sector they claim is backed by wealthy foreigners interested only in dominating the tropical poor.

And then, on December 26, came the great equalizer. The tsunami hit all ethnic and religious groups alike, and in the waves' immediate wake neighbors crossed cultural boundaries with no regard for ethnic or religious identity in their efforts to help each other. Soldiers on both sides of the war helped search for the dead. A newspaper photo of President Chandrika Kumaratunga shows him in an emergency shelter, smiling and shaking hands with a female Tamil combatant. The Sri Lankan president was blinded in one eye during a 1999 attack by a Tamil fighter. The photo was even more powerful because it wasn't staged.

Old tensions have begun to resurface, however, over access to international aid. Tamil leaders complained when the government refused to let United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan travel to Tamil-controlled areas during a visit on January 8-9. "There's a lot of anger just under the surface," said David Palmer, a Methodist pastor from Great Britain serving in the Tamil stronghold of Jaffna. "There's anger about the injustices of war, and there's fear in the north and east that all the tsunami aid will go to the south, because that's what happened with foreign assistance during the war."

Although it can't be completely separated from the ethnic conflict, post-tsunami reconciliation—especially between Buddhists and Christians—may prove more enduring because of the countless experiences of grassroots hospitality. As temples and sanctuaries filled up with the homeless, monks and pastors together helped feed and clothe the survivors.

Lokendra Abhayaratne, Anglican archdeacon of a southern city that was almost wiped out by the waves, took two trucks of food provided by the Protestant network Action by Churches Together (ACT) to a Buddhist temple run by a monk who had recently led attacks on an aggressively evangelical Methodist congregation. "I showed him we bear no malice, that the needs of the people are bigger than our petty gripes about each other," he said.

The opportunity for rapprochement began to wane, however, when President Kumaratunga ordered everyone out of the temporary camps. Aid workers are generally supportive of the decision, saying that returning people to normalcy is a priority, and that the emergency shelters are dangerous, especially for women and children.

Yet the displaced were left in limbo when the government said they couldn't rebuild their homes within 500 meters of the sea. Kumaratunga told a group of religious leaders that the government would build three-story apartment complexes inland, near the cities. Many are worried about the impact of moving thousands of fishing families into urban projects. Duleep de Chickera, the Anglican bishop of Colombo, suggested the churches should mediate between the government and displaced families.

Whatever the outcome, there will be no shortage of aid groups to help in the rebuilding. In Colombo many relief workers hit the ground running because they had longstanding partnerships with national organizations; others stumbled around looking for a four-wheel drive vehicle so they could bump along the ravaged coastal highway until they found someone upon whom they could unload their donations.

President Kumaratunga asked the churches for help in dealing with the large number of newly orphaned children. Stories of baby-selling and concerns about increased human trafficking have flourished and are nurtured by the government's inability to respond quickly; but some government officials are among the victims, and some government facilities are rubble.

The years of war have given the churches of Sri Lanka lots of practice in taking care of victims, including widows and orphans, and the churches know how to work with both sides of the armed conflict. Perhaps because they're a religious minority and not a significant protagonist in the Sinhalese-Tamil dispute, the Protestant and Catholic churches of Sri Lanka have earned considerable respect from their neighbors.

The world's churches thus have strong representatives here. The two big church-based relief alliances, Caritas Internationalis for the Catholics and Action by Churches Together for the Protestants and Orthodox, don't have to start from scratch. With savvy and experienced people like Nadarajah Arulnathan on the ground, they'll get good return on their investment in relief and rehabilitation.

Meanwhile the generous response of people around the world to the dramatic suffering brought about by the tsunami must not dwindle. This is a good moment to cancel the debt of the poorest of the affected countries. Huge debt burdens increase their vulnerability to disasters. And citizens around the world must demand that their governments make good on what they've pledged. After Hurricane Mitch in Central America and the Bam earthquake in Iran, pledges of assistance were broken as easily as they were made. People must hold governments' feet to the fire, making sure they pay what they pledge—and not simply by diverting the money from other needy causes.

Many governments can come up with more funding. When UN Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland suggested the day after the tsunami that many Western nations were being “stingy,” President George W. Bush assumed that Egeland was speaking only of the United States. The shoe certainly fits, though, and there is no good reason why Australia can give several times what the U.S. government is giving to tsunami reconstruction. Many in the world are doing the math, comparing the cost of operations in Iraq with what Bush has chipped in to tsunami recovery.

If aid for relief and rehabilitation isn't going to aggravate Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious problems, it must be delivered by those motivated solely by the humanitarian imperative, and especially not by a zeal to convert souls. Reports of tsunami orphans being taken by the hundreds into Christian compounds for conversion fuels the anger of hardliners who want to do harm to the church.

For the tsunami crisis to retain any chance of bringing peace to Sri Lanka, aid will have to go to both Tamil and Sinhalese communities. Yet the U.S. State Department has the Tamil Tigers on its terrorist list and forbids any U.S. organization to deal with them. The Tamil Tigers administer a considerable part of the country; if aid is not delivered to those areas, there will be more violence.

Christians in the global north were among those who responded generously to the tsunami's victims, and such solidarity will hopefully continue. Yet we must not lose sight of what the peoples of South Asia offer in return. Christians in the tsunami zone have developed a faith that exalts Christ as Lord while acknowledging that other religions play a positive role in God's plan for humanity. They have been peacemakers in the middle of brutality, shepherds in the midst of chaos.