

Report on the first Mission of Mercy to Sri Lanka February 19th – March, 14th, 2005

1. Preparation on the Mission of Mercy

The appeal for funds ran successfully. Within two months the society received approximately € 180.000,- and the number of members exceeded 200. The contributions in kind of several sewing machines, tools, linen sheets, toys, ball pens and medical articles have to be stored on four pallets. After lots of telephone calls we learned that pallets must not be loaded higher than 1.6 metres, the accompanying papers have to show content and weight and that there are no clearance papers needed in Germany. A friendly freight forwarder will transport the aid supplies to Lufthansa Cargo in Frankfurt free of charge.

We have decided to take along € 75.000,- at our first trip to the needy people. Already in January we had authorised Kamal, our confidant in Bentota, to buy desperately needed goods for € 2.000,-. Infant food, rice, drinking water, and mosquito nets have been scarce articles. We have been appalled at hearing, that children without school uniform were not allowed to attend the reopened schools. But what could we do, if everything felt prey to the sea? So we assigned Kamal to buy school uniforms for another € 500,-.

We had long discussions with the members of our association, whether it wouldn't be better to open an account in Sri Lanka and to withdraw the money when needed instead of taking it with us in cash. We still could not open such an account and it's doubtful whether we will be able to get it for our society registered in Germany. What us caused to take the cash with us at the end was the fact that the biggest banknote in Sri Lanka is the 1.000,- Rupee note that represents an exchange rate of € 8,-. You will get hardly get exchanged an 1.000,- Rupee note in the locally shops. So if we would like to provide a family € 500,- we would have to deliver a shoe carton full of money. This would be much to demonstrative. And as the Euro anyway is the favoured payment in Sri Lanka, we will give over Euros to the people in need. At our journeys we always will be accompanied by two Singhalese men. On one hand as body guards, on the other hand as translators. We know very well that the "jungle drums" are very effective in that area. Therefore we will change the region every two or three days to avoid possible robberies.

2. The first Mission of Mercy

The first journey was attended by three members of the society Christine and Hans Heinrichs from Munich and Dagmar Koch from Berlin.

Saturday, February 19th, 2005

The flight left Frankfurt accurately at 11:45pm. We were happy getting hold of a non-stop flight that usually takes 9,5 hours instead of having a stopover in the Emirates. The machine was fully booked as it should have continued its flight after a stop in Colombo to Phuket in Thailand.

Surprise: Rather exactly after half of the flight time there was an announcement, that we had to return to Ankara/Turkey due to a heart attack of an elderly lady. There it was, our stopover!

Sunday, February 20th, 2005

After an layover of about four hours on the manoeuvring area in Ankara the pilot announced that there had to be made a special technical check of the aeroplane as the machine was overloaded with app. 12 tons of kerosene during the landing. And because in Ankara there was no technician able to do this check they had to demand one in Munich.

Result: All passengers (app. 270) had to check out and were taken to a hotel near the airport by busses. After about 10 hours of waiting there the whole procedure the other way around and we could continue the flight with a properly checked plane.

Monday, February 21st, 2005

In Sri Lanka's capital city Colombo there was no change at all to see after of the flood disaster. The traffic is still chaotic and you can feel the atmosphere of a metropolis as in former times.

We left Colombo southwards. After about 10 kilometres there were first signs of the effects of the tsunami. We passed destroyed residential houses, cabins and shops as well as stranded boats, mostly wrecks. The tracks of the railroads have already been fixed and the people were very busy. Big machines removed debris of the broken down houses. The farther we went south the worse were the impacts of the flood disaster. Both sides of the street a scene of destruction although already six weeks of clearance have been done by the inhabitants. The biggest shock we got when we reached Maggona, the last village before the destination Beruwala. There was absolute demolition. The beach was covered with wrecks of boats. We saw a damaged police boat half sunken in the sea. Chaos all around us. The people here live in emergency accommodation, mostly in light tents. As the government has prohibited to build houses within 100 metres from the beach (there were

300 metres in discussion) they are forbidden to rearrange their residences. That means that the whole part of the beach localised between the road and the railroad will remain untilled. Except of the very few wooden cabins that have been already rebuilt before the ban of the government it will be difficult for the former occupants to put up new buildings. Inland there is already a close settlement existing and barely property available. In addition the prices for inbound property rose rapidly. Yet a resolution for the people relevant hasn't been found neither by the government nor by the local authorities.

In Beruwala and Aluthgama it didn't look much different. Former Shopping streets have been razed to the ground. By viewing sporadically seen foundation walls you are able to anticipate where houses have been situated. Here still are lots of emergency accommodations and tents as well. The beach is covered with pieces of broken glass and debris. Only the operating hotels have cleaned their parts of the beach. The same view only at the entrée of Bentota. The Bentota Beach Club (former Robinsonclub) is as far as possible destroyed. The longish formed peninsula appeared as an island, as the sea grabbed a broad part of the land. Meanwhile the "island" is linked with the mainland again.

Tuesday, February 22nd, 2005

As planned we found out how the land lied at the first day. We have met with several Singhalese people of confidence, to find out whether already salvage has arrived respectively the potential demand. From everybody we got unitary answers: the government has promised help. The natives had to go to the local police station to get registered and to notify the loss in detail, for example housing, shop or fishing boat. The worth of a destroyed shop will be replaced by 25.000 Rupees (app. € 190.-). A ridiculous amount but everybody is anyway anxious when this money finally will be paid. Although there have been announcements, nothing really arrived yet. There are discussions what the government may do with the contribution funds. Only the weekly payout of 375,- Rupees (€ 3,-) per person did work yet. For the natives too little to live, too much to die. If there wouldn't be already several international private organisations be active on location, there wouldn't have been any relief up to now. So we just found the situation that we expected to find. The natives need money to buy food, something to wear, household aids and furniture as well as dwelling before monsoon starts in April.

Wednesday, February 23rd, 2005

In the area of Bentota the damages contain, as there hardly have been residences situated close to the beach. The damaged hotels already are in reconstruction and operating. You rather don't see any signs of the flood disaster at Bentota beach anymore. Tourism will very shortly return. Altogether different from Beruwala. Without native guides we wouldn't have relocated the places, where 200 Shops have been situated before the tsunami came. Everything is razed to the ground. Only foundation walls show, where houses have been situated. The Pear Beach, formerly a lovely bungalow holiday park, disappeared totally. Nothing at all witnesses that there has been a very favoured goal of tourists. The former hotels Ypsilon, Confifi, Barbeyn Reef, Bayroo Beach, Riverina, Palmgarden, Swanee, Pearl Beach and the Eden Resort where closed (the Eden Resort reopened meanwhile). The hotels Neptun and Lanka Princess are operated but have just a few guests. Not one Beach Restaurant exists anymore. The well known Sagarika, Sasika and Blue Lagune have vanished. After a walking tour at the beach we were thirsty and looked for something to drink. But there was no bar available. A native companion got us some coconuts from a palm tree to satisfy our thirst. Afterwards we went inland to Moragalla Community. At both sides of the road only totally destroyed houses, debris, snapped off palm trees and broken inventory and although it still was chaotic, already some kind of order appeared. The cleanup efforts have been in full activity. We have been shocked that even two kilometres upcountry the one metre-water level of the flood was visible at the walls. Thank god our companions know the whereabouts of the owners of the destroyed houses and shops. We attended twenty families at this day and gave them not only donation but also some courage to face the life. We were able to make them change their minds from filled with bitterness to optimism. The gratefulness was great.





Thursday, February 24th, 2005

Today we went to Maggona, Paiyagala North and South, three villages situated north from Beruwala that have been merely fishing villages. All houses, cabins and whatever else was used as accommodation was totally damaged. Several aid organisations have already constructed tents and emergency accommodation by bending plastic covers. Another British relief organisation had started already to build wooden huts. After consulting the staff of these organisations we learned that they had money and material to build 100 huts. However the need was 600 huts according to reports of the police station. Out of this reason we decided to build houses there as well. We talk about very simple houses, emergency accommodation in fact, good enough to give shelter to the natives during the oncoming monsoon. That explains the price of € 150,- per house. The government promised help for the people who lost their homes, but no one can say when this help will arrive and what kind of help it will be. Should the government as a matter of fact decide to provide the people with property and maybe with stone house on top about 5 or 6 kilometres inland, it still would be possible to use the provisional solutions as fishing huts for boat motors, flews and so on as they are in about 200 metres distance to the beach. Several timber companies will provide us offers in the next days. At the beginning of March we plan to start building the houses.





Friday, February 25th, 2005

Today we went southwards to the area between Ambalangoda and Hikkaduwa. That is the place where the railroad disaster happened and a whole train with 2000 passengers was swept away by the tsunami wave. Again the same sight: only the foundations tell us, where formerly houses have been situated. On top of these foundations the natives start to build tents and huts to be prepared for the rainy season. On our way south we passed a lot of temples areas, each with 60 - 70 tents as emergency accommodations for the homeless people. In the temples three times a day is a feeding for the poor. When we attended such a camp a long queue of hungry people was waiting for a bit of rice with Dal (lentils).

Afterwards we have visited the comprehensive school of Bentota. There we've had an appointment with the headmaster. The school was untroubled by the tsunami but the classes were bursting at the seams as they had to affiliate pupils from all surrounding schools that have been damaged by the waves. In the moment there are 2000 pupils attending the lessons held by 17 teachers. The library that still was in construction was commuted into class rooms without further ado. This school has a partnership with three schools in Tangalle, in the south of the island. According to the headmaster the dimension of the demolition there is hardly to express. Lots of pupils and teachers have nothing more than the clothes they wear. After a short discussion on location we decided to hand over a larger financial donation. Furthermore accompanied by the headmaster we will go to Tangalle in the coming week to transfer donations in kind.



Saturday, February 26th, 2005

Today we went to Beruwala again to visit there another twenty families who have lost their shops and gave over a financial contribution. Eighteen families in Beruwala have lost their houses and are not allowed to rebuild them as the properties had been situated too close to the beach. We decided to spend € 18.000,- for a real estate of 2.860 qm inland and build 10 stone houses there. We estimate app. € 10.000,- per house. Before the families that will live in these houses got assigned the area, they had to sign a contract, that the financial help expected to come from the government (about € 1.500,- - 2.000,-) will be passed to our association, to help somebody else. The area is situated in Hettimulla (community of Beruwala) and first clearing has to be done. There is still Jungle all around.



Sunday, February 27th, 2005

During the day we learned that four pallets with donation goods have arrived in Colombo. But the customs is causing problems and wants us to pay high duties on the goods. Till about three weeks ago aid supplies have been duty free. Now they have cancelled this duty-free allowance. Explanatory statement: There is everything available to be bought in the country. Another reason could be, that tamil rebels have ordered to get two complete helicopters delivered in parts and several kinds of weapons on top declared as aid supply.

Monday, February 28th, 2005

In Colombo we therefore asked for a confirmation assuring that our association is solely a non profit making society. At the customs this confirmation didn't show an success as there a statement of the Department of Trade and Industry existed saying that nothing at all may be imported tax free. Therefore we will give it another try in the Department of Trade and Industry on Tuesday to reach the attribute "duty free" for our aid supplies. At least we have achieved that we would have had to pay half of the carriage cost as tax. That means an amount of € 450,-.

The embassy employee we talked with, warned us already that we would have to face a lot of disappointments as there are still 100 container with aid supply stored in the harbour, that had been sent when the duty free arrangement still was valid, but arrived when it was cancelled. None of the sender is willing to pay the taxes at the moment. The embassy member presumes that the ministry for social affairs will gain the goods and will distribute it to make profit with it.

The Department of Trade hasn't approved our claim to pay € 450,- as tax. But the clerk offered us to make the goods available for us free of charge if we would hand him over 7 sewing machines. We refused. The next day a friend of us goes to one of his acquaintances who works at the customs and buy paying a "little charge" and handing over two boxes of medical goods he received the customs stamp that was overdue such a long time. After one week finally our aid supplies have been available.

Tuesday, March 1st, 2005

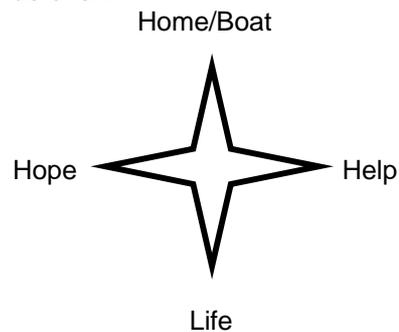
Today we contacted a confident native who lobbies the fishermen that have lost their boats. As there are list available at the police itemising the losses of the fishermen (e.g. boat with motor and flues or just boat with motor or just boat, flues etc.) it was rather easy to choose the relevant people. We had decided to make an total amount of € 10.000,- available for them. 40% of this amount is assigned for the building of five new boats, the rest of the amount will be used for the repair of damaged boats, for buying new flues and if the situation should arise used boats too.

Wednesday, March 3rd, 2005

Today we got certified the buying of an real estate designed to be covered with ten stone houses in a notarial act. The purchase price was paid instantly and so the mutation occurred at the same day.

The houses, presumably finished in three till four month, will then be consigned to the families (listed by the police) which have lost

their residences situated close to the beach. The notarial transfer will not happen before we have received the claims of compensation of the affected families. Now, that several projects like wooden houses, stone houses and fishing boats have been ordered and we often heard the question for the name of our society (which is quite difficult to pronounce for somebody Singhalese) we needed a logo. This will be the symbol of an four-pronged asterisk:



The words which give reference, all consist of four letters. The objects will be marked just with the asterisk added with the number of the house or boat. We have decided that the people shall choose the names for their boats or houses themselves.

Thursday, March 3rd, 2005

In the early morning we went to Tangalle to the schools associated with Bentota School, which is a drive of about four hours. After arriving in Tangalle we first visited the girl's school, thereafter the boy's school and finally the primary school. The headmaster of Bentota School and his wife had used our financial donation to buy essential relief goods for the most effected teachers and pupils of the particular schools as there are: mosquito nets, clothing material for pupil uniforms, gas cookers, rice cookers, electric ironing, vitamin drinks, sewing machines, chairs and gas cylinders. Four pupils which had an extremely long way home without bus link received a bicycle each. Editorial journalists of three different daily newspapers have been invited, have interviewed, made photos and will give an account of the action of mercy.

The primary school that we had seen was hit hardest by the flood disaster. The three protracted buildings had been afloated 1,4 metres. The complete school books and teaching material are destroyed, especially the 25 personal computers in the computer schoolroom are wrecked.

The school was closed for one month but meanwhile it opened again for 600 pupils on a provisional level. Here external help is urgently needed.



Friday, March 4th, 2005

Today we went to the dockyard to sign the formerly negotiated contracts for the five fishing boats that have to be build.

Saturday, March 5th, 2005 we went to Magonna to provide some survival support to a family who has lost its whole belongings.

Sunday, March 6th, 2005

Today we took a look at our donations in kind. Our fast friend Kamal accepted to store the 39 cardboard boxes in his house. Of course the neighbours watched the truck delivering lots of stuff and where very curious. When we arrived with our bus to pick up tools for building the wooden houses, within a few minutes all neighbours appeared to snatch anything of the goods. To prevent an tumult we had to break our plan and left with the tools and some sewing machines and electric ironings that we had promised to the seamstresses of the destroyed beach shops.

Monday, March 7th, 2005

Day of rest.

Tuesday, March 8th, 2005

Today we went to a temple camp near by Hikkaduwa to distribute toys, sheet and milk powder. Although 67 children had been announced there have been at least three times as much. Each child was allowed to select one toy out of the big boxes.

After all we gave some painting material to the kindergarten of the camp. The pleasure was unbelievable.



Wednesday, March 9th, 2005

Today a big spreading action took place. First we visited a kindergarten in Komalla, a quarter of Bentota. There we handed over a big box filled with stuffed animals. Afterwards we went to Bentota Hospital and delivered several medical goods of urgent need to the senior physician. Later we visited the Bentota School once again. We were invited by the headmaster to receive photos about our Tangalle-donation action. We handed over a large number of ball pens to him.



Thursday, March 10th, 2005

Today we meet Priyantha again, the man who attends the interests of the fishermen. There is an urgent need for catamaran fishing boats, another conventional fishing boat and altogether eighteen flues with adequate accessories as there are floaters, weights etc. We have authorised him to obtain all these things.

Friday & Saturday, March 11th & 12th, 2005

On this day we handed over a food donation of 5.000,- Rupees (app. € 40,-) to about forty persons who lost their jobs two month ago and are wage less. Saturday afternoon we went to have a look at the wooden houses in construction. Meanwhile twelve of these houses have been finished. Thereafter we checked the terrain, where the stone houses will be built. Her the future owners had already cleared the ground to enable the measurement coming Monday.



Although there still was a lot of need for aid, our funds have been used up and our sojourn time of three weeks where over.
The second tour of mercy will follow in two weeks time, July 4th, 2005.