

## **THE E MAIL THAT STARTED UK FRIENDS OF GALLE**

**Written by Devsiri P Hewavidana to his friends Immediately after Tsunami**

5 January 2005

### **To All Our BRITISH Friends in UK**

#### **Tsunami disaster obliterated my home town Galle , please give generously**

Dear All

You all must have seen on the TV, the first dramatic pictures came from Srilanka on Boxing day, where a group of men and women were clinging on to a bus shelter. Then two were dragged away by the current to their death in front of us. The stature of Buddha was on the right next to the bridge . A bus full of passengers floating towards the bridge . Yes it was where I was born, my home town Galle that you saw on boxing day. On top of the picture the little "lake" you saw was our famous test cricket ground . Only 6 months ago, I was watching South Africa on the ground with my children but when you saw it TV it was fast becoming a floating cemetery. At the very moment you were watching it, 14 school boys from Harrow were hanging on the pavilion roof to escape the death from 15 feet high water flow. ( They all were rescued, but sadly everybody at the bus station died.)

It was sheer agony for 16 hours because we were frantically trying to contact somebody in Galle but all the telephone lines were dead. Finally, the message came that my mother, sisters, brothers and the rest of the family were safe in Galle

Thank you very much for all your calls, messages left on our answering machine and all E mails sent last week expressing your concern and prayers for our families in Srilanka. . I do apologize if Ruvini and I had not get back to you, but as you could imagine, we were trying frantically to contact our two families in Southern Srilanka over the first few hours. Then it was marathon watching of TV news.

We were very comforted by all your messages and prayers knowing that you have remembered us at the most traumatic time in our country's history.

My Cousin who had come from Australia for a holiday was at the Town Centre that morning. Galle town centre is (or rather "was") by the beach. When she saw a dark sea horizon, she had thought a heavy monsoon rain was going to come in. She did shopping quickly and hurried back home with her daughter. Half an hour later, the Tsunami came in and destroyed the beach and the town. My sister is still in shock because all the friendly shop girls she was talking to a few hours ago had been dragged to their death by the sea.

People are so traumatized. They still cannot believe what has happened. In a tornado or earth quake or a landslide you at least get a few minutes warning and you can run. But this Tsunami was so cruel. People didn't know until 15 ft wave came barging in to their sitting room. I don't think people in Galle had time even to think what hit them .

Srilankan had never heard of the word "Tsunami " before so they did not pick up any danger signals. When the first tide went out to sea and sucked all the water and sea bed was exposed , hundreds of children went to marvel at the sea and walk on the sea bed. People have started to pick fish & treasures up. Nobody had realized that this was a deadly sign that a Tsunami was on its way. 15 minutes later, the second ferocious wave came in and smashed the children against the buildings in the town. This wave then flattened the town and ran further ½ miles inland killing everybody underneath and destroying every house. I hear large buses and boats are still stuck on first floor buildings. Galle is a ghost town now.

Its beggars belief that all the scientists in Hawaii Earth quake monitoring Centre can come on TV and say that they knew that Tsunami was on its way but they had no contact numbers on their address book to warn India and Srilanka. They had two hours to do something. Why on earth one of them didn't pick up the phone and dial CNN or BBC world service and ask to broadcast a warning and save 50,000 lives. Can they live with their guilty conscience.

My family house is only 3/4 miles away from the beach and the water did not come that far. They were lucky because in some areas, the sea had gone 2 miles inland. . Now my mother and sisters have turned our house in to a mini relief camp. They are cooking and distributing food for about 200 refugees everyday. My brothers-in-law and sister-in-law are doctors and they are rushing round treating injured. International aid is on its way.

The fact that our immediate family has escaped unscathed is no comfort to us because so many distance relatives and friends have perished in this terrible disaster.

For instance, my mother's sister's son was bringing her two children home from boarding school in Colombo that morning. They were on that train, "Queen of Sea".. 1600 other people died with them in the train. My mother's brother's son was going in a taxi to meet them at the train station. The taxi is still in the sea with his and driver's bodies. Its so sad.

Bodies are still being recovered from under rubbles and inside Galle Harbor . Today they have collected 270 bodies and the death count goes up and up by the hour. 7000 in Galle alone. 30,000 in Srilanka so far and 160,000 in Asia. Words fails us to describe this terrible catastrophe.

I think its very sad that the survivors had no bodies of their loved ones to say final good bye or had no opportunity to give them a decent burial. Children cannot touch their dead mothers & fathers for the last time. I heard one British charity worker saying on TV last night that the saddest thing for her was to see hundreds of small children in Galle staring at sea, hoping that it would somehow return their lost parents.

What can you say to a poor child who saved himself by hanging on to a lamp post whilst her mother, father and five brothers and sisters washed away to sea . There are hundred cases like that in Galle alone and multiply it by thousands to understand the scale of this disaster in Asia.

The whole country is in shock. They need so much help. British people have shown extra ordinary generosity by donating £60 Million so far aid is pouring in for all the affected countries. I saw on TV, returning British tourists saying how people in Galle rescued and sheltered them in their half destroyed houses until the British Embassy air lifted them to safety . I read in the Sunday Times about a British nurse on holiday there who was rescued by the fishermen. Now back home she has set up a charity called "**Rebuilding Srilanka**" to help the ruined village. Ruvini and I badly need to do something similar too.

Unfortunately there is no infrastructure left in the towns like Galle. Food and aid have reached there but most are lying in ware houses because nobody there to co-ordinate the operations. People have started to die with disease now. About 300 Srilankan doctors have returned home on leave to help survivors. I just heard that enough medicine and medical teams has reached Galle now so things would start to improve there. Food and medicine are not enough. 40% of dead in Srilanka were children and the most remaining are orphans... They have gone through unimaginable horror in matter of minutes. Let's not forget them. There should be an urgent programme to save them.

People in Ashford Kent UK where we live, have been extremely generous to us over the last week . My friends have collected thousand of pounds worth of medicine, bandages, linen and other things. The local hospital gave us lorries full of medicine. . They have taken one lorry load to our High commission yesterday and would take another load tomorrow to air lift to Srilanka.

The last thing these destitute people need is Manufacturing Engineers like us coming to talk about Lean and Efficiency. (There's no industry left in Galle) So I am not going home yet. However, the time will come when

Galle needs housing and school building programmes in a large scale and I am hoping to go home for a couple of weeks and help building the town up. Mean time, all we can do is collect more & more donations to send home.

I have worked with many manufacturing companies in the recent past, so I have so many friends in UK. In the long run, I am hoping to get their help to raise funds to build a few houses for some families who lost everything in our town. A house can be built (~750 Sq. feet) with all basic amenities for Under £550. I am sure I have enough friends and colleagues to raise enough money for at least two houses.

There is nothing left in Galle, nothing left in coastal areas of Srilanka and nothing left in Southern Asia. What happened to us is incomprehensible. Thousands of orphans there have no future unless we can help. Its so sad.

I look at my little one year old son Dinum, he is just walking round the sitting room smiling happily. My daughter Shynie (8) and other son Deshan (9) are fighting to play the "Game Boy" on TV screen. They have everything, more than enough food, warm clothes, a nice school, comfortable house and two loving parents. Then I look at SKY NEWS and see this little 7 year old girl in Galle holding on to her tiny one year old brother, the only treasure left to her in the whole world. Her sad eyes tells me a terrible tragedy, a thousands words cannot describe. She has lost both her parents and 3 brothers and sisters.

Now my son is throwing his milk bottle away because he had had enough milk. I look at the girl again and my heart breaks. I wonder where on earth she is going to find some milk to feed her little brother. They have no food, no more clothes, no shelter, no roof over their head and no relatives to look after them. We have a fridge full of food and sweets but my children asking for something something different tonight. Ruvini wants go to supermarket tonight and buy everything they want for supper.. I wonder how long that little girl has to wait in the queue tonight to get a piece of bread.

I am a Buddhist, but I ask God, **is this fair**. I feel very guilty for having a warm house, some comfortable life style and a beautiful family in the West whilst thousands of my people in Galle have lost all their families, houses and livelihood.

TV crew will pack their bags and leave Galle in a few weeks time. Newspapers will find new headlines & concentrate else where. World leaders will have something else to talk about. But please don't leave these people behind and forget everything. The tragedy in Galle (& elsewhere) will remain for years to come. Let's do something permanent for them.

We must do everything to save these orphans in Srilanka. It will take at least 5 years to restore Galle alone. We need every penny to rebuild Srilanka.

For the time being, all I am asking is, if you are in the town with your wife hunting New Year sale bargains, don't let her spend all your money. Please pop in to any bank or charity shop and donate some of your spare cash to Tsunami Appeal. Alternatively please ring **Tel 8706060900** or online [www.dec.org.uk](http://www.dec.org.uk). **Please forward this e mail to all your friends**

Once we assessed the needs in Galle, I will appeal to you again in a few weeks for some help with a long term project to help the grief stricken people in Galle..

THANK YOU

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Kind regards

Devsiri P Hewavidana

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Kent

UK

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