

Garden of Hope

One of the areas hit by the tsunami almost a year ago was the east coast of Sri Lanka.

Sujeewa Fernando, who comes from Colombo but has been living and working in Basel for 15 years, just happened to be visiting her family in Sri Lanka when the tsunami struck. She lost no time in starting to help, but forgot that her friends in Switzerland might be worried! When she returned, she immediately set up an association called Tsunami Handaid and enlisted the help of anyone she could think of – fellow teachers at the International School of Basel and parents of her class of four to five-year old children – to raise money to help Sri Lankan people who had lost everything.

So a group of twelve people of all ages between 17 to 60 duly flew to Colombo during the Easter holidays this year, taking the money they had raised, clothes, toys, medicines, books and so

on. Moreover, they helped with their own hands, building three houses in an area where everything had been destroyed by the tsunami.

The area that Sujeewa, who's project manager, selected for the building project was the town of Muttur on the east coast near Trincomalee. As well as building the first permanent housing there, they distributed medicines, clothes and other essential items to schools. Incidentally, all volunteers pay for their own flights and living expenses, so that every franc donated counts towards the project.

At first all went well. "We met a lot of NGOs there who were very happy to see such a small group at work," Sujeewa said. As a result of their efforts they were given three acres of land by the government there, and the plan was



Sujeewa Fernando

to take a group out every holiday and build a total of 52 more houses. They are calling the project Garden of Hope. On that basis Tsunami Handaid, which will also become a NGO, started raising funds in earnest, holding bake sales, a concert given by an ISB music teacher, a presentation, and collecting money on Refugee Day and the ISB open day.

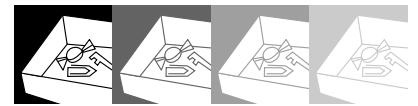
"We collected Sfr 13,000 in just over a month," Sujeewa said. "It was crazy – I don't know how we did it." A second group flew out in July to build three more houses, with electricity, water supply and sewage system connections to each house, but this time the problems started.

Trincomalee is an area where all three races live, the Singalese, Tamils and Muslims. This had been a "clear" area for some years, i.e. free of terrorism, but now the demonstrations and violence started again, with the result that shops shut and people stayed at home. Moreover, other NGOs insisted that local labour be paid, which was contrary to Sujeewa's concept of using voluntary labour, included the future occupiers of the house.

"We had to fight about everything. The government wanted us to buy building materials from contractors, but we insisted on going to shops ourselves and collecting all the bills for the sake of transparency," Sujeewa related. She knows exactly what the materials for building a solid house should cost: Sfr 4,700. "Another obstacle was that this was mainly a Muslim area where



Building a brick floor in one of the new houses.



women have no rights, and nobody believed in me as project leader or even heard me.”

Then it transpired that the land given to them for the houses had been confiscated by the government but was in fact privately owned. This problem is still being sorted out. Unfortunately all this meant that the planned trip in October had to be cancelled, as it was simply too dangerous.

Since Sujeewa feels a strong responsibility for the safety of her volunteer groups, she’s decided to switch Tsunami Handaid’s attention to the southern part of the island. “I’m now looking at private owners, with no government involvement,” she said. “Everyone who goes from here goes to help, but if the people there are only interested in big money and projects (i.e. by the major NGOs) it’s no place for us.” The concept of 52 houses will stay, however.



The first Tsunami Handaid group in Sri Lanka.

The next house-building group of volunteers will go out to a village in the southern Sri Lanka at Easter next year; an earlier date is not feasible because of the elections on November 17. Meanwhile, Sujeewa is delighted that Tsuna-

mi Handaid has just received Sfr 25,000 from a foundation in Lichtenstein.

*Donations may be made to Tsunami Handaid to PC-Konto 60-161457-3
www.tsunami-handaid.ch*

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