The three of us arrived in Colombo on 14th July 2009 (Tuesday) and were scheduled to travel and visit the orphans at the IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) centres in the Northern district of Vavuniya. Genocide, abuse and assaults, assassinations, hunger, malnutrition, mutilated bodies, continuous cries from children, hunger, anger and rage were some of the thoughts that filled our minds before the trip. These disturbing thoughts and images were commonly discussed and highlighted in the international press and media, through the internet, at functions, and other avenues. However, we were mentally prepared to encounter the after-effects of a post-conflict crisis. Some of us felt that we were “walking into the enemy’s hands”, and we would not be able to witness the true situation at the IDP centres as the Sri Lankan authorities would want to portray a “favourable” image to us. Needless to say, we were cautioned by our family and friends not to make this trip.

The impetus of our trip - In May 2009, Sri Lanka announced victory against the LTTE (Liberation of Tamil Tiger Elam). This was a 26 year (begun in 1983) war and during this time, Sri Lanka had channelled significant amount of funds in trying to defeat the LTTE. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan Buddhist temple (SLBT) situated in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, had an orphanage in Delgoda, Sri Lanka (30 miles from Colombo), that was nearing completion. This orphanage was initiated after the Tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka and is able to house a maximum of 200 orphans. The Temple’s Committee unanimously decided and volunteered that the orphanage be used to provide temporary shelter for any orphans from the IDP camps. Hence, our mission was to perform a viability study on the practicalities and the need to mobilise orphans from the IDP camps to the Delgoda Orphanage. We were also mindful that this could be seen in a negative light by the public, wherein a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple in Malaysia is housing Tamil orphans from the IDP camps.

We understood that the criteria of selection must be that the orphans/children were in deplorable/critical conditions and that our assistance would benefit them. We also understood that our duties and responsibilities were great, i.e. we had to provide necessary assistance from psychiatric, medical, lodging, food and most importantly, a successful relocation programme.

At this point, it is important to note that the three of us will report what we saw at the IDP camps irrespective of our race or religion. We will report the facts without any prejudice from either side, political influence, personal ill-feeling or religious sway. We will report on what we personally witnessed and evaluated through our professional opinion. We are fully aware that if we misrepresented any facts, our reputation and standing in society will be tarnished.

I am a committee member of the SLBT in Malaysia whilst Dr Veronica and Mr Chandran are independent and did not represent any society or establishment. Noteworthy - Our trip was funded by ourselves.

* A brief background of our expedition - Dr W Shermal Perera, a second-generation Sri Lankan Sinhalese living in Malaysia, and managing a biotechnology Company. Mr Gnanachandra S Aydunari, a second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil (Ceylonese) born and raised in Malaysia, and retired Partner of one of the Big 4 accounting firms; and Dr Veronica Shanti Chelliah, half Ceylonese and half Sri Lankan Sinhalese, and owns her own private medical practice in Malaysia.

Putting the wheels in motion…
I had informed the Sri Lankan Embassy in Malaysia of our intention in using the Temple’s orphanage in Delgoda as a temporary facility to house the displaced orphans. I had indicated my travel plans to the IDP camps in Vavuniya to offer my help and service. The Embassy provided their full support in terms of our travel plans and had also discussed this proposition with the relevant authorities in Sri Lanka. In the meantime, upon hearing my plans to travel to the Northern district, both Dr Veronica and Mr Chandran decided to join me on this landmark trip.

Our journey begins…
On the day we arrived in Colombo, we were contacted by Army personnel and our passport information was obtained to acquire a permit to cross the primary border situated between Anuradhapura and Vavuniya. This process took an entire day and during this time, we discussed between ourselves how we should react to the different scenarios and events that we could be faced with upon our arrival at the IDP camps.

We left the Cinnamon Grand Hotel in Colombo, at the wee hours of 3.20 a.m. in order to arrive at the check point at 8 a.m (see Fig. 1). At 7.45 a.m., we got to the check point and we saw many people going across the check point. There was a complete check of our vehicle. Our passports were checked against the permits. We were then informed to meet the Head of the IDP centres, Brigadier L C Perera at the Army Camp.

However, when we passed the checkpoint, we headed to the Camp site, not knowing that the two sites were at separate locations. Interestingly, we noticed how easy it was for us to travel. We had no restrictions and there was no “assigned chaperone” with us. When we met with soldiers or police and asked for direction to the IDP camps, none told us that we could not go or checked our permits. There were many civilians on the road. After passing the check point, there was a vast open area. We wandered into several directions heading to the IDP camps. After about 30 minutes, I decided to call Brigadier L C Perera. He gave me directions to his camp and said that he was waiting for us.

Brigadier Perera then proceeded to give us a detailed explanation about what took place during the war. He said that many Sri Lankan Tamils were rescued and transported to the IDP camps. He said that they had no way of knowing who was a LTTE member and they had accepted the fact that probably most of the people rescued, in one way or the other, had assisted the LTTE’s movements. He said that these people were not at fault; they probably had no choice on the matter. Ultimately, the Sri Lankan Government’s aim is to rebuild their homes and relocate them to their place of habitat within the shortest period of time.

There are about 270,000 people at the IDP camps, approximately 160,000 adults and 110,000 children. We enquired about death tolls and he mentioned that it was between 4–10 deaths per day. The records reveal that almost 80% of the deaths were people over 60 years. 95% of the deaths were cases related to medical conditions such as diabetes/heart conditions. We were impressed when Brigadier LC mentioned that the IDPs were getting 1,900 Kcal daily, close to the required standard of 2,100 Kcal daily as per the World Food Programme (WFP’s) standard. We did observe several cases of IDPs who were malnourished, specifically in the hospitals. However, at the makeshift schools, there weren’t any sighted.
After a long discussion, we visited the IDP camps. All three of us travelled with the Brigadier in his 4WD vehicle. The Army camp was about 30 minutes away from the IDP camp. The IDP camps were divided into zones. We visited all the zones. We drove around to look at the conditions and people in the camps. The zones are over a length of 7km and a width of 2-3 km. Majority of the tents are provided by the UN and the Government of China, which have been erected in this area.

Zone 3 is the most congested when compared to Zone 1 and 2, as it houses the most number of people (see Fig. 2 & 3). This Zone is the one that manages the 100,000 people that evacuated the terrorist control area. The tents look stable and it was apparent that during strong winds and rain, the tents could be secured to provide safe living conditions. What was also apparent was that the people in these camps did not show any fear of the Army personnel. Most went about on their daily routines. We also noticed that the people we saw in the camps were generally not malnourished. We saw people preparing their meals, having baths and chatting with each other. Most importantly, we never witnessed any person running away from us or even running towards us in rage or remorse. None asked us for any help or begged for money.

Apart from the camp sites you see in the pictures, there are areas in each camp where there are banks, shops selling food and groceries, barber, and collection sites (for food and basic amenities). The banks have been established for the IDPs to keep their monies. This provides security for the Sri Lankan Tamils who are there. We saw people lining up in an orderly fashion to collect their food and amenities. There was no chaos which showed that the people may have been satisfied with the way the supplies were handled and distributed at the collection centres (see Fig. 4).

Brigadier L C Perera also took us to the hospitals at all the sites. The hospitals were packed with people. When we walked in, we immediately noticed the orderly fashion that people were waiting to see the doctors. There were two doctors that were attending to the patients. In all instances, we noticed that everyone was being treated. Dr Veronica spoke to the patients in Tamil and the feedback she had was positive. There were no complaints of mishandling or abuse. Kudos goes out to the doctors there who are doing a fantastic job in treating the patients. However, we would have liked to see more doctors so that the waiting time for patients could be reduced. Nonetheless, what is more important is that proper medical attention was being given to everyone that walked into the hospitals. The wards were congested but medical attention was being given and we did not witness any patients left unattended.

In our opinion, more volunteer doctors are needed. If you are a medical doctor and would like to offer your services, please drop me an email at mmd239@hotmail.com and I will forward your request to the Ministry of Health in Sri Lanka.

Currently, there are growing cases of Typhoid and common dysenteric diseases. The Sri Lankan Government has consulted an irrigation specialist to better manage the water treatments in the area. In Figure 5 above, you can see the medical camp by the Government of India which has been there for the past 6 months and is located at Zone 1. The Indian Government has supported the IDPs by providing about 60 medically trained staff and medicine supplies. The hospital is fully equipped with trained personnel who are receptive to these conditions. The supplies are brought in regularly. We had a good session with them and did discuss their challenging times. I must give India full credit for taking the interest and helping the patients in these camps.

Figure 3: Zone 3-most populated camp

Figure 4: IDPs queuing for food and other supplies

How it all started
It was first mooted when Dr Shermal Perera got news that there were several orphans in the IDP camps. The immediate response was what we could do to help these children. A temporary home in a Colombo orphanage was one of the options. It was not going to be that easy that the authorities were going to hand over the orphans to us. The only way to make an informed decision was to actually visit the IDP camps. And for that, we needed permits from the Ministry of Defense (MOD). Dr Shermal Perera was in contact with the Government of Sri Lanka’s (GOSL) High Commission in Kuala Lumpur and its Deputy High Commissioner, HE Major General Udaya Perera provided full support. He actually encouraged us to go and see the IDP camp for ourselves. Hence, the decision was for us to see the state of the camps and assess their needs.

Flying into Colombo and road journey to Vavuniya
Three of us (Dr Shermal Perera, Dr Veronica and myself) flew out on Tuesday, 14th July 2009 to Colombo and it was 9pm by the time we checked into our hotel. We got our MOD permit in the late afternoon on Wednesday, 15th July, and decided to depart for the Menik IDP camps in Vavuniya early on Thursday, 16th morning. Dr Shermal’s old friend provided us with a 4 wheel drive and a driver, and we departed at 5.30am. We were at the Vavuniya checkpoint by 7.30am and after checking and clearance, we had free access to all the surrounding villages where life seems to be going on as normal. There was military/police presence, but not over bearing. Apart from 2 checkpoints, nobody stopped us to search or check for anything. We then communicated by mobile phone with Brig LC Perera, the Chief Coordinator for the IDP, and were directed to the HQ.

Chat with Brigadier LC Perera
We started off with saying that our primary purpose was to see how we could help the child orphans, to which the Brigadier explained that the GOSL had taken special responsibility for this part of the IDP and in fact it was under the direct purview of the First Lady.

We then gave us some pertinent information and some were in response to our questions:

AS WE SAW IT on 16 JULY 2009...and you do not have to believe it. But this is, as it was... – By IG Chandran

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Sri Lanka needs help and the IDPs need help. Let's look forward.

There has to be housing, utilities and basic infrastructure, and most of all no military presence inside the camps. The IDPs were going about freely and walking about freely. The beach was fully dotted with people (now IDPs) which the LTTE had looped as cover; Zone 1 was developed in Nov 08, Zone 2 in Jan 09 and Zone 3 in May 09; Each Zone is further divided into blocks and each block has its own kitchen; The IDPs have drawn out their own roster for cooking responsibilities; The NGO’s provide 1,900 Kcal of food daily (2,100 Kcal is the recommended amount as per WFP); There are 2 hospitals (1 donated and managed by India with 60 staff and an operating theatre); There are also makeshift schools for children with desks and chairs; Brig Perera also showed some pictures taken from his mobile when they flew over the lagoon and the beach before the final push - The beach was fully dotted with people (now IDPs) which the LTTE had looped as cover; About 10,000 LTE cadre have surrendered and they have been put in different camps; The guess is that there are another 1,500-2,000 LTE members still in the camps; All the IDPs have in the last 25-30 years lived under LTTE environment and will need counseling settling into free livelihood; The immediate assistance needed was support, both material and moral; We travelled from Kuala Lumpur to Colombo on 14th July 2009. On arrival, Dr Shermal started to communicate with Captain Silva (our contact in Sri Lanka organised by Maj General Udaya Perera and his wife Thelma, and Mr IG Chandran, who I learnt was also travelling together with Colombo Camp General in full support of us going to personally visit the camps in our own capacity. He informed the Ministry of Defence in Sri Lanka of our intentions to visit the orphans and to travel to the IDP camps. He also told us that he would organise the respective Army personnel to facilitate our permits to allow entry into the Vavuniya area.

Visit to the IDP Camps

Brig LC Perera offered us to accompany him in his vehicle and our car followed behind. This is what we saw:

There were sentry points to enter each camp; Yes, there was perimeter barbed wire fencing. There have to be boundaries….; There were sentry points to enter each camp; Yes, there was perimeter barbed wire fencing. There was a mobile phone network; The density of tents seemed to allow entry into the Vavuniya area. The orphans and to travel to the IDP camps. He also told us that he was concerned about the following issues:

- The children had only recently lost both parents in war and were probably still shaken up and scared. The trip to Colombo may add fear to them;
- The children may have developed a sense of trust and bonded with their caretakers at the camps and may feel insecure by the transfer and new caretakers;
- Whether the facilities at the orphanage in Delgoda would be adequate;
- The mental, emotional and psychological state of the children and whether the transfer would aggravate their emotional and psychological state of mind.

Notwithstanding the above issues, if the Delgoda orphanage offered an improved alternative, then, the relocation and transfer is still a workable option to explore. Furthermore, I also thought about the caretakers and whether there was sufficient manpower with relevant experience to cater for the children’s psychological needs. I went on to picture the photographs that have been in circulation over the press and internet and the ‘hear-say’ stories from my patients and friends to which I shuddered and began to weep. The fear crept into me at this point thinking about the unknown and imagining the worst. At this point, I realised that there could be many different scenarios of the current state of affairs of the orphans and decided to make a personal assessment of the orphans and conditions at the IDP camps. I made a call to Dr Shermal, and the next thing I knew, I was invited to a dinner at Dr Shermal’s house where I met the Deputy High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to Malaysia, H.E. Major General Udaya Perera and his wife Thelma, and Mr IG Chandran, who I learnt was also travelling together with Colombo Camp General in full support of us going to personally visit the camps in our own capacity. He informed the Ministry of Defense in Sri Lanka of our intentions to visit the orphans and to travel to the IDP camps. He also told us that he would organise the respective Army personnel to facilitate our permits to allow entry into the Vavuniya area.

Conclusion

We have to put this into context. There are about 300,000 IDPs, and in such influx, and it is post conflict, and in a third world country. It is a tremendous effort and in our view, let’s not be dragged away from the real issue by just the picture of IDPs behind “barbed wires”. So much is being done, and has been done, with priority to resettlement and retraining vocation such as fishing. Resettlement can’t be hurried. There has to be housing, utilities and basic infrastructure, and most important of all, the villages have to be demined before resettlement. As the permits were being organised, on the 15th of July, we decided to travel to the orphanage in Delgoda to assess its stage of comple-
Efforts were being made by the authorities to increase the calorific intake to 2,100 Kcal as per WFP's requirement. From a medical point of view, there are a large number of cases who appeared malnourished. I believe they may have been malnourished prior to coming into the IDP camps and they would certainly require more than 2,100 calories to alleviate themselves out of this state. From my observation and understanding with regards to dietary intake, perhaps nutritional supplements and a higher-protein diet could be provided.

**Water/Sanitation/Hygiene**

There was no visible rationing of water although there were queues at some hydrants. There were people washing themselves in the open. We were informed that UNICEF supplies 50 million litres of water daily for use at the camps. In addition, there are also tanks that supply water to the camps. Drinking water is purified from these sources. Of serious concern was sanitation. It was obvious that toilets were insufficient. This, I foresee may become a problem over time, if not adequately addressed, especially with diseases transmitted by the oral fecal route. This may also increase flies' related illnesses. In addition, an increase in the incidences of malaria, typhoid and dysentery could occur. I observed that some of the IDPs walked barefoot and the other common footwear was open sandals. De-worming, if not already carried out as a procedure, should not be precluded. This may help in the preventive care in the general wellbeing and health of the IDPs. Pest control and fogging activities, if not already carried out, would be a deterrent to many potentially fatal diseases.

**Education**

I was surprised that there were properly demarcated classrooms based on age in each of the Camps. The children at the school appeared in clean clothes with books in hand. We visited the classes, spoke to the teachers and students, and there was a group preparing for their A-Level exams in December 2009. They had their revision papers, past question and answers with them. However, the Year 5 students who were preparing to sit for their exams at year-end, had not received their revision papers. Brigadier Perera was disappointed and said he would look into the matter personally. There was a class where the teacher was absent and that seemed to be a common problem.

**Conclusion**

Overall, it was a great eye opener for all of us. Thanks to all parties concerned that made this trip possible. Personally, the conditions were far better from what I was expecting to see and experience. Do they need help? Most certainly.... Anyone wanting to offer help in anyway may contact me at drvc1@yahoo.com anytime. Personally, I feel that the following items/services is beneficial for the IDPs: Financial aid; Food supplements; Footwear; Umbrellas; Worm treatment; Volunteers - To help at the hospitals, to teach at the schools, to listen and counsel and to assist with the resettlement plan.