

ASIANEWS

The Newsletter for the Sustainers and Friends of Tibet



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Dear Friends,

After the summer break we are back with our quarterly update on ASIA's projects, the experiences of those who have visited and those who work for them, our campaigns and their results.

If you have any advice, suggestions or ideas for our Online Newsletter please write to us by sending an email to the editorial office of ASIANEWS info@asia-onlus.

We would also like to remind you that you can register to receive ASIANEWS simply by filling in your details on our website www.asia-onlus.org/richieta.htm.

WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THIS ISSUE!

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EDITORIAL

Mission Accomplished: the results of ASIA's work in Sri Lanka

by Andrea Dell'Angelo, Secretary-General of ASIA ONLUS



A year on from the beginning of the first post-Tsunami emergency intervention in Sri Lanka, ASIA Onlus is already able to list the results and to consider the positive outcome of its experience in this new country.

My first visit to Sri Lanka in July coincided with the final inauguration of the new village of Weragama, an hour south of Colombo: 130 homes which have permitted a population of more than 600 people, mostly children and elderly people, to leave the tents or shelters (the shacks made of wood or sheet iron) in the camps for Tsunami victims and to move to their new homes, complete with bathroom facilities, a system of natural ventilation and a new external space for cultivating

vegetable gardens to be used for providing for the family.

(Photo: Andrea Dell'Angelo during the inauguration ceremony of the project)

Our twofold objective: reconstruct the houses and hope for the future

The challenge was taken up shortly after the Tsunami tragedy. We collaborated closely with the ONG UCODEP and with the UN agency UN-Habitat, working at the same time on the same project. The project was co-financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by many local Italian groups including the Region of Lazio, the Town of Viterbo and the Region of Tuscany. The objective was not simply to reconstruct houses but most of all to restore the dignity of the people by re-establishing a community of values and relationships in a new territory. For this reason we preferred to speak about 'homes', or houses that are not just buildings but places in which family life takes place.

The Beneficiaries are the central characters in our projects

Today the new village of Weragama is completely inhabited and integrated into the nearby communities, the families there are preparing to cultivate their vegetable gardens, the children play in the green areas within the village, bicycles and little taxis drive around the village streets illuminated by the photovoltaic energy of the street lights. The area also has a system of drainage channels which ensure that the land is stable particularly during the monsoon rains.

The mission in Weragama can be considered to be closed, however, in recent months ASIA Onlus has started new projects in other areas in the north-east of the country which has been affected by the long seemingly unending civil war.

We hope to be able to repeat the experience of the Weragama project soon and to let you know about it.

Photo (families next to the newly constructed houses)



TRAVEL NOTES

A Day in Panadura

By Valerio Giacone, in charge of ASIA ONLUS Projects for the Development of Education

Valerio Giacone took part in ASIA's project in the area of Panadura in Sri Lanka. During his short stay there as a volunteer in the field, he was able to observe, analyse and reflect on the social-political situation that this country is experiencing. The following is an excerpt from the travel notes that Valerio took during the months of his stay.

Behind the house where I am living there is quite a large school and each morning for the approximately two months that I have been here in Panadura, I have been woken up by the national anthem and the high-pitched voices of the children that attend the school. I have to say that the first few days, this noisy and intrusive wake-up call together with the humidity and the charming company of a few friendly mosquitoes did not put me in the best mood in the morning. In fact, quite the opposite! Then in the following weeks, day after day, the melodious shouts of the pupils who punctually at 7 o'clock each morning used to sing these songs for about 5 minutes, became almost pleasant to my ears.

By the time I was used to this impeccable early morning appointment a morning arrived when I opened my eyes without the help of the children. Maybe I hadn't heard my personal alarm because my sleep had been too deep or perhaps today there was some special holiday or celebration that I didn't know about?

I still had some doubts but straight after breakfast Mr. Nandajhit, the coordinator of our project and father of two children made everything clear to me. The LTTE Tigers had threatened to blow themselves up inside one or more schools in Panadura so it had been decided to stop lessons, close the schools and put road blocks everywhere. Later on, in the afternoon, speaking with people, I understood that the choice of Panadura as the objective had not been random. Vellupilai Prabhakaran, leader of the LTTE had always said that he wanted to avenge the death of his grandfather years ago at the hands of the Sinhalese troops right in this little town south of the capital. Then does that make it right to blow yourself up in a school? If it's true that violence begets violence and that no war will ever finish if we cannot bring an end, before everything else, to the hatred and the bitterness we have within us, then the tolerant and Buddhist Sri Lanka will never have peace. *Photo: The children of Panadura* Panadura, June 2006



OUR PROJECTS

ASIA's Support for Tibetan Refugees in Nepal

by Linda Fidanza, in charge of ASIA ONLUS Distance Support Projects

In July 2006 I was in Kathmandu for a mission to monitor two distance support projects through which ASIA supports the Tibetan community in exile in Nepal: the Manasarovar school and the Triten Norbutse Bonpo Monastery.

Even though these two situations are entirely different, both of them express the efforts of the Tibetan people to preserve their traditions and not to lose their rich cultural and religious patrimony which makes them unique and different from all others.

The Manasarovar School is located in Boudhanath, a suburb of Kathmandu populated by Tibetan refugees. It is here that every day a multitude of people do a "kora" of the Great Stupa, a circumambulation of pilgrimage around the impressive shrine, declared to be one of the greatest world heritage sites by Unesco in 1979. The enormous eyes on the shrine represent the mind of the Buddha and the heart of life not only for the Tibetan Buddhist community but also for the Nepalese Hindus.

The school came about thanks to the determination and the aspirations of three women

Founded by three women in 1999, today the School has 192 children registered, 107 of whom are supported at distance by ASIA. The course of education at the school lasts 8 years: 3 years at the infant school and 5 at the primary school. Awareness of the importance of the role of education and a commitment to safeguarding the cultural identity of the new Tibetan generations are the basis of the work that the school staff carry out with enthusiasm every day. The results are clear to see: the children are well instructed, stimulated and lively and are all motivated to continue their studies in spite of the very difficult political and economic situation in



which they live. They speak English very well (the teaching language, since the Nepalese government has forbidden the use of Tibetan), they have lessons in computer studies but among the other subjects they also learn traditional Tibetan dances and songs thus keeping alive their link with their origins. *Photo (Karma Tsekey and the other two directors of Manasarovar)*



A Bonpo Monastery in the heart of Kathmandu

Founded by master Lopon Tenzin Namdak, the Monastery is one of the main centres for teaching and transmission of the pre-Buddhist spiritual tradition of Tibet, "Bon".

It currently has 140 monks who have arrived from Tibet and Nepal, driven by their desire to deepen not only their knowledge of Bon but also of other disciplines which represent the heart of the most ancient wisdom of Tibet: astrology, the art of painting thankas and creating mandalas, poetry, Sanskrit, cosmology and the art of debating. After 13 years of studies and by passing numerous exams, students can receive the qualification of Geshe.

In parallel a four year course of meditation gives the possibility to deepen one's knowledge of the Dzogchen teachings and experience solitary retreat.

At the end of their studies some monks choose to remain at the Monastery as teachers while others decide to return to Tibet and transmit all the teachings received from the master Lopon right in the place they originated.

Distance support: a very worthy gesture

The help that the children at the Manasarovar School and the monks at the Triten Norbutse Bonpo Monastery receive from supporters is absolutely essential. The school is financed exclusively by the quotas paid by the students and by ASIA for those who come from needy families who otherwise could not send their children to school. *Photo (the monks in the Monastery courtyard)*



The Monastery exists thanks to donations and distance support with which it is able to buy food, teaching materials, blankets and all that is necessary to permit to monks to live in a dignified way.

In this difficult historical moment for Nepal the Tibetan community is facing an extremely hard test, in exile in a land in which they have no rights, struggling with difficulty to survive. The help of so many supporters – 160 at the moment – is of the greatest importance.

EXPERIENCES

"We've been there"

di Maria Rosaria Graglia e Francesco Baderna



"We've been there", is practically a clichè for so many people who have been to so many places. But this time, being there was not a clichè for us. It wasn't like the other times.

Last year we joined one of the distance support projects of "A.S.I.A." and became "sponsor" to a little girl who attends the Manasarovar Educational Foundation in Boudhanath on the outskirts of Kathmandu. Last August

we spent a few days of our holiday in Kathmandu which gave us a good opportunity to visit the school. *Photo (the little Pema Yangzom)*

After the initial enthusiasm of the idea, a thousand doubts set in about whether or not there would be an opportunity for a visit. However, after we had exchanged some useful e-mails with Karma, the Director of the school who swept away our uncertainties, on Sunday August 6th at 9 o'clock in the morning we were in a taxi heading towards Boudhanath. Actually it was not easy to find the school, but with the help of Karma, our mobile phone and the patient taxi-driver, we reached our destination.

Karma greeted us with a smile and we met the little girl with Karma helping us to overcome the embarrassment of a very special meeting. After a cup of tea and with the help of a world map – we hadn't looked at one since we were at primary school – we showed the child where Italy was and the atmosphere started to warm up.

While we were visiting the school Karma showed us the teaching programmes that the various classes were following. We were very struck by the fact that the children were learning three languages: Nepalese in order to live in their host country, English to live in the world to come and Tibetan not to forget their roots.



The bell rang! It was the break and all the children were in the school hall with their teachers. All together from the smallest to the biggest, all in their school uniforms and all of them watching us with curiosity and certainly less embarrassment than us. The bell rang again and everyone went back to class and we continued on our tour of the kitchens. We went up to the first floor where the students of the higher classes were as well as the library and the computer room. Before we left Karma told us about some of the everyday problems of the school but also about the satisfaction that her students give her. Then she spoke to us about the future of the school: it will shortly move

to a new building that is bigger and more functional with plenty of space for the children and their teaching activities. Another cup of tea and then we said goodbye.

"We've been there", we've been there because we wanted to. We've also been there for all those who, when you mention charity, N.G.O.s, emergency, projects for the needy, turn away or, worse still, clear their conscience with "...but who knows where the money ends up?". Our help ends up in Boudhanath, ends up in Dongche, ends up in Shala, wherever it is needed.

"We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop." Agnes Gonxha Bejaxhiu (Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

ASIA IN THE WORLD



"ASIA GERMANY: tangible help for the Tibetan people for years"

by Heinz Auspurg, member of the governing board of ASIA Germany

In May 2004 the great day finally arrived: a group of ten friends met in the town of Gauting near Munich to found the "Forderverein ASIA Deutschland e. V.", an association officially affiliated with ASIA. *Photo (the members of ASIA Germany)*

Since 2001 a small but growing group of people, co-workers of the internist, Dr. Wolfgang Schweiger, have worked on their own to collect funds for ASIA's projects in Tibet and to provide for the distance adoption programmes for Tibetan children. They were helped by the Gauting Protestant Lutheran church for the administrative part.

A group of volunteers united in their love of Tibet



Wolfgang Schweiger has spent a lot of time in Tibet on humanitarian missions as a doctor. Because of the situation in Tibet, his main activity has concentrated more and more on education projects, in particular ways of starting up and extending ASIA's distance adoption projects in China. His personal testimony concerning the increasing deterioration of the situation of the nomads – due to the environmental changes related to the economic situation – and ASIA's capabilities and experience gave our group the motivation to look for funds and donors in order to help the Tibetans develop their own skills in their land of birth.

ASIA Germany currently has the status of a humanitarian association officially registered as an organisation particularly dedicated to the cause of helping foreign countries and donations are tax-deductible.

According to its constitution, the objectives of ASIA Germany are: support for medical care, for the educational system and for the culture of the Tibetan people, activities which should be started up by means of donations. ASIA Germany looks after collecting funds and is not an operative association. The funds collected are placed at the disposal of ASIA for the realisation of specific projects to benefit the Tibetan people. Projects are chosen in close collaboration with ASIA. *Photo: Dr. Wolfgang Schweiger*



Wolfgang Schrader, Gauting

„I've known Wolfgang Schweiger since 1999 when I organised a delegation of two doctors to go into the war zone in Kosova for the German section of "Médecins du Monde". He wasn't able to go on that occasion. Afterwards, however, I helped him to publicise his work in Tibet and to receive administrative support for donations from the Protestant church in Gauting.”

All the active members of ASIA Germany – currently around a dozen – work as volunteers on a loyalty basis. Our rewards are the joy and the success coming from the cooperation projects. Our work is motivated by our desire to help the Tibetan people and contribute to the preservation of their culture, without political or religious aims.



Irmgard Auspurg, Gauting:

„I have never met a people as good-natured, as radiant and as cheerful as the Tibetans. I'd like to try and help some of them.”

The aim of our current support is the improvement of the scholastic situation for poor children in Tibet. Particularly in Qinghai, the situation in which the Tibetans have lived for centuries as nomads or farmers is getting worse year after year. Their land which was once suitable for grazing and agriculture is undergoing a process of desertification due to drought, sand storms and erosion. The number of livestock has been dramatically reduced because of the severe winters. These changes, along with the influences of the rapid Chinese modernisation, have brought about an impoverishment in the situation of the rural Tibetan population which, as a result, cannot take on the expenses of educating their children. This concerns most of all the situation of the children of the nomads for whom - due to the enormous size of the regions in which they live - attending primary school requires the high costs of boarding school, not to mention the expenses of high school or university!



Christian Storch, Munich in Bavaria:

"I've studied Buddhism for several years and received important teachings from Tibetan masters. Working for ASIA has let me give back a little help to a country and a people who have given the world a profound knowledge of the aspects of human nature.”

Precisely for this, ASIA's education projects offer an opportunity for a new life away from the poverty and in which there is an alternative possibility of being able to build one's own future by oneself. We consider education to be a key element as well as an indispensable requisite for giving the Tibetans the possibility to make their culture survive in their native country, on the Tibetan plateau. As a consequence, we of ASIA Germany strongly support ASIA's projects for the construction of Tibetan schools and especially the distance adoption programmes for Tibetans in Tibet which make schooling possible for the children of poor nomads and farmers, who are often orphans and particularly needy, through personal adoptions.



Stefan Karl, Germering:

"The disappearance of Tibetan culture would be a very serious loss for the knowledge of the whole world. I think that the distance adoption projects are an important step in maintaining the Tibetan identity and giving Tibetan culture in China the possibility of a future'.

At the moment ASIA Germany is financing a distance adoption project for 140 boys and girls in Qinghai, Gansu and the Tibetan Autonomous Region so that they can attend primary and middle schools; in addition secondary and university education for 8 students according to ASIA's adoption programme: four of them will receive instruction to become teachers of English and Tibetan, two will study Tibetan medicine and two computer studies. The money for the schools will go to those in Shala and Golmang while the proceeds for the medical sector will be assigned to the Dongche clinic, all in Qinghai Province.

Even though these amounts seem rather small in respect to those at ASIA's central office, we of ASIA Germany are pleased with them. All the proceeds come from private donations and we have realised how essential it is to have a high level of enthusiasm, commitment, the power of persuasion and hard work in order to make people aware of the problems of the Tibetan nomads in a period in which there are other priorities.



Gisela Auspurg, Munich:

"I like working for ASIA: I do a job that I love and it is, most of all, useful for a lot of people".

In conclusion, we would like to express a warm "Thank you" to all our supporters and organisers, also in the name of the Tibetan beneficiaries. Following the start of activities in our area, we are nourishing the great hope to enlarge the project throughout the whole of Germany in order to substantially increase the volume of the donations we receive.

CULTURE

"Lha Gyalo! Lha Gyalo!" May the divinities prevail!*

by Laura Trombetta – project manager: developing training in the health sector at the peripheral and central levels in Chamdo Prefecture, Tibetan Autonomous Region, PRC

A shout rises suddenly from the throats of the Tibetans, the car stops, the scene is always breathtaking at that altitude but it isn't for this that one stops at the top of the mountain pass. It is to hail the divinities in the ritual salute towards the sky of all the Tibetans.



This invocation expresses a profound and ancient form of religion and is the beginning of an extraordinary type of ritual that is repeated each time one reaches a high pass before beginning the descent. The jeeps, the trucks, the buses stop, the Tibetans get off and throw coloured pieces of paper printed with Buddhist prayers up into the air. Each traveller carries little prayer flags with him that are tied next to a multitude of others that are found at the top of the pass, then everyone places a stone on top of the heap of stones. Each gesture has a precise meaning and all of them together are transformed into an offering to the divinities of the mountain for protection during the long journey. The wind blows relentlessly through the high passes carrying the prayers printed on the multicoloured flags up to the abode of the divinities. For this reason the flags are called "lungta" or "wind horse" in Tibetan. These small coloured flags flutter across the whole of Tibet, not only on the mountain passes but also in front of the monasteries, around the tents of the nomads, on the roofs of the houses, a symbol of silent but present religion.

The experience is really intense when you get to the top of the passes that are over 4000 metres

The road goes up slowly, laboriously, cutting the mountains in great curves and one proceeds immersed in absolute silence and immense space. The view disappears into the infinity of the spectacular landscape which is continuously changing: from the plateau of green fields one passes into the region of Amdo to the north, to the rocky mountains and the forests of Kham, to the desert lands and intense blue salty lakes which suddenly appear in west Tibet, to the snowy mountains of the Himalayas

The air is transparent and rarefied when one is at an altitude of about 5000 metres, where each small movement becomes extremely tiring for those who are not used to it.

This is, without doubt, the hardest form of pilgrimage

Those who set out from the most distant villages and pasturelands have to travel even more than 1500 kilometres before they arrive at their destination, sometimes taking up to a year, sleeping on the roadside and facing cold and snow in the most difficult conditions. The pilgrims are helped by the people they meet along the way because their efforts are made on behalf of the whole community and not only to earn individual merit, in accordance with the Buddhist religion.

Travelling in Tibet on the roads you meet a great number of open-top half-wrecked trucks incredibly crammed with farmers, nomads and the faithful all on their journey to Lhasa, or to the sacred mountains or to the monasteries.

Pilgrimage is one of the ways in which the religious awareness of the Tibetans manifests more profoundly and openly

Through pilgrimage one goes back to the ancient ways that belong to the history of each family and to the collective memory. It is an occasion to be together, to meet friends and relatives who live in far-off places, to exchange news, to make a little business. Entire families undertake a journey even for a few months, particularly in the autumn and winter when there isn't much to do in the fields and the pastures.

For Tibetans pilgrimage is a way to state their own ethnic and cultural identity and, most of all, to distinguish them from the Chinese who have occupied their country for fifty years. It is extraordinary that after such a long period under the Peking government and after having passed through terrible years of religious repression that pilgrimage, in all its forms, has remained alive and an integral part of the existence of each Tibetan, something that a Tibetan wouldn't give up undertaking at least once during his/her life.

Those who reach Lhasa by plane should forget about the fascinating reports of travellers of the last century.

Since my first visit to Lhasa twenty years ago, the changes have been devastating. The ancient Tibetan city has by now become a tiny part compared to the new Chinese city which is visibly growing and becoming oppressive everywhere with its nondescript buildings in glass and cement.

The uniformity of the new buildings is making Lhasa look like many other dreadful provincial Chinese cities

On the other hand the uniqueness of the old Tibetan areas has been sorely put to the test by the demolition of many of the antique houses, real treasures of traditional architecture, which started at the beginning of the nineties.

The entry to the square in which the Jokhang temple is located, heart of all that is sacred to the Tibetans and centuries-old destination for the faithful who come here from all parts of the immense plateau, is now full of neon lights which light up at night with flashing colours. A Chinese fast food restaurant clashes violently with the atmosphere of the ancient temple.

Only the Barkor area around the Jokhang has survived with all its charm, a labyrinth of little lanes overlooked by Tibetan houses, with shops belonging to craftsmen and sellers of yak butter, little restaurants where you can eat "momo" (dumplings filled with yak meat) and drink salted tea and small hidden temples.

The Chinese population continues to grow on the roof of the world

This is happening due to the extensive immigration of recent years which is changing the equilibrium of the population and making the Tibetans a minority in their own land.

Immigration is encouraged by Peking which considers the immense and scarcely populated Tibetan territory as a "new frontier". Chinese arrive from the overpopulated countryside of Sichuan in search of work, open restaurants and shops, become hairdressers, taxi-drivers and entire teams of workmen on building sites at work seven days a week.

The two worlds do not get on well together and they tolerate each other with difficulty, their characters, habits, food and language are different. Even though the law is clear about the double use of the two languages the fact is that Chinese is always the language of power and work. If you don't speak it and write it, you are excluded.

There is no official document that isn't written in Chinese

Tibetan is not an essential requirement for getting work in the public administration and for this reason a lot of Tibetans no longer know how to write their own language correctly, a slow and progressive loss of identity and a dramatic question mark for the future of a language that is so rich and ancient.

I lived for more than a year in Chamdo, an isolated little town in the heart of Kham (west Tibet), 1200 km from Lhasa and the same distance from Chengdu, capital of the Chinese province of Sichuan. I was the only foreigner in an area that was still off-limits. Even the town of Chamdo has grown rapidly and the Chinese population has doubled in the last four years; the Tibetan houses remain clustered only around the Jampaling monastery on the hill that rises above the town centre, united in a maze of little alleys.

The men are tall and proud with long hair wrapped around their heads with red or black ribbons

This is a distinctive sign which they do not renounce even when they are wearing Western clothes. They buy and sell coral, turquoise and silver with which the women make splendid necklaces and headgear, go around armed with long knives even though the law doesn't allow it, and continue living in the same way that they have always done.

The shepherds who wander with curiosity around the streets of Chamdo seem to come from another world with their great foxskin hats and traditional coats filled with sheep wool. They come down to town from the high pasturelands to sell meat and skins and with the money they make they buy barley flour, material and shoes for the whole family. They are dumbfounded in front of the escalator at the new department store which has just opened and don't dare to step on it. When they go back to their villages they will continue to live like they have always lived, in harmony with nature but in the hardest conditions, in one of the most difficult environments in the world, where the winter lasts nine months a year and where snowstorms can decimate entire flocks of yak and sheep.

The situations on the Tibetan plateau are many and complex

There are also many uncertainties for the future of this country and its people, hovering between a modernisation imposed by Peking and an ancient past full of history and traditions which risk disappearing. However, their sense of identity and belonging culturally is very strong and rooted in the Tibetan people, a highly important element for safeguarding their ancient and unique culture.

**The following article was published in the monthly magazine Class, July 2005*

OUR CAMPAIGNS

500 Mothers for Tibet

As you may recall, last Christmas we started the Campaign: 500 Mothers for Tibet and asked each of our supporters to lend a hand.

Now we are at a quota of 260 (in July 2006) which we are very pleased about and are sure that you will continue to help us so that we will reach our target by Christmas 2006.

Of the 260 new people who joined our Distance Support more than 15% were actually introduced to it by our supporters who became Ambassadors of ASIA Onlus to friends and colleagues.

We would like to take this opportunity to give a special thanks to our friend **Barbara Palombelli** who, as soon as she has the opportunity, talks and writes about us with so much passion and enthusiasm that we receive a lot of requests to join!

We will shortly be sending you an e-mail announcing our new campaign and when you receive it we kindly ask you to circulate it among your friends and contacts.

LATEST NEWS

We got 10 out of 10

All supporters who ended their Distance Support in the month of July because the boy or girl they were supporting had finished their course of studies have decided to support another child at distance! 100% renewed! We thank them for their trust and wish them all the very best for this second commitment.

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Our Website has changed

Some time ago (a long time ago...) we decided to update our website. The address remains the same but the contents and images will change.

We are also creating a Banner and hope that all those who have the possibility to insert it in more visited websites will contact us for the Link. Just think that many new ASIA Supporters actually arrived through visiting our website! You, too, can help us to promote it...

Help us NOW!

By simply making a payment following the indications listed below in order to help us do more and do better for safeguarding and protecting the Tibetan people!

Contributions and donations:

Post Office current account nr. 89549000 in the name of ASIA Onlus

Bank current account at Monte dei Paschi di Siena c/c nr. 3893.50 ABI: 01030 - CAB: 72160 – CIN: M

For Distance Adoption and Study Grants:

Post Office current account nr. 78687001 in the name of ASIA Onlus

Bank current account at Monte dei Paschi di Siena c/c nr. 5622.72 ABI: 01030 - CAB: 72160 – CIN: F

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