



Special issue on Sri Lanka!



Dear Friends,

At this time we would like to expand your knowledge of a country, which is well known for its splendid nature and culture, but also, unfortunately, for its deep wounds from a 30 year war, and, most recently, for the tsunami.

ASIA has been present in Sri Lanka since 2005, when it started working on reconstruction projects in the country after the tsunami, and now it can count many completed projects: schools, houses, community centers, rain water tanks, vegetable gardens, waste recycling systems, environmental education in schools and many others.

Today, the war has ended, but there are still unresolved knots in the Tamil issue. Strong is the drama for over 300,000 refugees escaping bombings and gathered at the moment in emergency centers.

In this issue, we are trying to tackle this story with the collaboration of an authoritative journalistic firm, and friend of Asia, that has followed the events in Sri Lanka from the beginning. **Enjoy your reading!**

SRI LANKA

The Tamil Tigers and the origin of the conflict in the tear-shaped island

by Raimondo Bultrini, journalist for Repubblica, expert in Asia's southwest

ASIA projects in the Tamil area of Sri Lanka – Cooperation projects

Diary of a mission

by Riccardo Ducci, ASIA International Program Officer

The kindergartens in Urawatta e Weragama - Sponsorship

EVENTS & NEWS

Solidarity appetizer – Friday, 2 October, Rome

Presentation “Update on ASIA projects” – Saturday, 3 October, Merigar

Assembly of ASIA members – Monday, 5 October, Merigar

Exhibition “Contrasti” – from 28 November to 27 December, Brescia

Publication of the booklet “Tibetan Arts in Transition” – available on request

ASIA attended the 4th edition of the fair L’ISOLA CHE C’E’ – 19/20 September, Como



SRI LANKA

The Tamil Tigers and the origin of the conflict on the tear-shaped island

by Raimondo Bultrini, journalist for Repubblica, expert in Asia's southwest

In Sri Lanka, the country of the wonderful tropical jungle and the terrifying tsunami of 2004, a military war, that started in 23 July 1983, has just ended.

Whoever is reading this article, what with the anniversary having just passed, might have already read in the Italian or international news about the importance of the day, and of the month that passed into history as Black July. To sum up, 26 years ago on July 23rd a pogrom of Tamils started in the street - especially in Colombo. They were massacred by Singhalese as revenge for the Tiger's first major military ambush, which killed 13 government soldiers in the north.

But we need to remember that a date is only used to commemorate, remember, or assess past years, because ethnic hate has its roots in events farther back in time and more difficult to understand than some episode used as an excuse to stir it up.

At the conclusion of a military war (there is much longer to wait for a victory of conscience that will end racial discrimination) it is most difficult to understand if history's lessons will indeed be useful if the roots of the hate have not been cut. Diffidence, or even the very real fear of "different", too often bias the readiness to accept and understand the other and his or her needs, to establish an acceptable way of living together, and—why not— to collaborate.

The Singhalese and Tamil ethnic groups in Sri Lanka have, for 2,500 years, shared a small paradise (by chance a tear shaped island) in the heart of the Indian Ocean, just opposite the State of Tamil Nadu, motherland of the current 80 million Tamils distributed all over the world. It may be that not many in the West know the history of the former Ceylon, with its record of three successive colonizations, each one of them conditioning life and relations between the two ethnic groups that are so near geographically, yet so distant genetically.

First were the Portuguese for the XVI and half of the XVII century, then the Dutch for the following 200 years, and finally the English in the XVIII century. They each conquered and governed the island, exploiting its possibilities of fertile soil and natural ports, from which their galleons roamed the Ocean looking for customers and new lands to conquer.

Traditionally, the Tamils have always inhabited the northern and northeast coasts, and under the Portuguese—who only converted to Christianity a part of the Hindu and animists—and the Dutch, their religions were more or less autonomous from the rest of the country.

It was under the control of British India that all the provinces were united under a central government that never represented all the ethnicities of the island. Thus began the more serious problems between the two communities, starting with the adoption of Singhalese as national language.

It is always useful to look at the remote past to observe both social and political phenomena that in our times shake even the foundations of civil coexistence among human beings born under the same sky. On the other hand, the recent declaration of an end to the war is in itself an historical event, from whichever angle we look at or judge it; the Tigers of Eelam, who were dreaming about their own independent state, have lost their supreme leader and the regular army has deep control of the territory from south to north.

It is possible that a clandestine armed movement, together with terror organizations, will come back to spread suffering and instill doubts about the effectiveness of a "global war" that has enmeshed thousands of civilians in the last Tiger strongholds in the northeast.

On the other hand, before tackling the future, we need to ask ourselves if the price paid for this victory was too high, considering that the Tamils are paying and will keep paying for a long time, with a double load of suffering: the loss of their loved ones and the living conditions they must endure in the "welcoming" camps set up by the government, where only a few humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross are still given permission to enter.



(Official estimates by the UN talk of 300,000 refugees and 7,000 civilian victims since the beginning of the year.)

The justification given for denying, even after the end of the war, permits to almost all volunteer groups and NGOs already present there (ASIA is already present in Sri Lanka with a project for civilian accommodations for the tsunami victims, but not for refugees) is that military and judiciary authorities are still examining single cases to establish if men and women in the camps could be members or former members of the LTTE.

During a trip on the eve of the capture of the last Tamil bastion in the region of Vanni, one of the managers for an agency coordinating NGOs gave me a list of all the difficulties encountered in opening any humanitarian space in the war zone, starting with the prohibition of using cement to build shelters for civilians and the rationing of gasoline for even ambulances (for fear of appropriation by the Tamil).

Even without trusting partisan press and websites like Tamil.net, the few accounts leaked out of the regions under military assault already give an idea of the measure of the tragedy that has been going on, particularly in the last two years.

It was the current president Mahinda Rajapaksa who two years ago launched the “total war” to eliminate the Tigers from the island, and, with a few months delay, he has stayed by the dates he declared in his famous speech in which he rejected any additional diplomatic talk. All the regions under attack, including the “free zones”-the liberated zones where refugees could pour in- have been off limits for over two years, and even longer if we consider the preceding periods.

The field hospitals, even the cement structures, have now been attacked more than once by the army and by the guerrillas, not to mention the villages where people cannot rely on any harvest and are being forced to move with little or no notice to avoid bombs and shoot-outs. Death tolls from wounds, infections, and diarrhoea left untreated could be more than 30,000, a very high percentage if we take into account the official figure of 70,000 victims for the entire conflict.

On the eve of the last day of the war, a statement by an UN spokesman mentioned an “unprecedented humanitarian disaster” and called for immediate assurances from the Sinhalese government that there would be a return to normal life for the Tamil community which had been touched by war and social reintegration for without delays or additional discrimination.

But in this island that was the first bridge of the Buddhist religion toward Burma (another country tormented by an intolerant military regime) and the other countries in southeastern Asia, which still follow this nonviolent religion, distrust and fear have not disappeared with the end of the military organization that has kept control of the country for over 30 years.

It is easy under these circumstances to become a pessimist, of limiting ourselves to observing what happens with a sense of impotence and resignation. The peace process has now more than ever a need for international attention, although it will be inevitably distracted by other tragedies, other emergencies affecting other Asian and world countries.

The peace process in Sri Lanka needs the support of the world community, because there is need for additional housing for the refugees, a new economic structure supporting them, an education system insuring respect for their dignity and ethnic traditions, and sanitary structures, all of which will work to support not only the physical but also the psychological rehabilitation of the victims of this dreadful war.

It goes without saying that the most delicate issue is the one of children who are traumatized, having grown up among bombs, massacres that they witnessed with their own eyes, rushed night escapes with no water, food, or clothes, having had to abandon wounded, brothers, parents, uncles along the journey.

When this terrible chapter of history is written in details, there will be much to ponder about this. It is one more humanitarian holocaust on the planet, and we may wonder why, as usual, the world has just stood at the window to observe it.

Not even one single day should be lost in figuring out what we can realistically do at this moment.



SRI LANKA

ASIA projects in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka

During the years spent in Sri Lanka, ASIA has implemented cooperation projects in support of the areas of the Tamil majority of the eastern regions; in particular, they have developed them in the Batticaloa district, the main eastern town with more than half a million inhabitants, Sinhalese, Moor (Muslim) and the Tamil majority.

In 2006 and 2007, years of a strong and harsh resumption of the conflict between the Tamil and national armies after a short cease-fire following the tsunami tragedy, ASIA implemented two important projects financed by the FAO and by the WFP (World Food Program) in the Batticaloa district:

- **Project of Support for Fishermen Families of Batticaloa, Victims of the Tsunami**



Direct beneficiaries: 530 people

Indirect beneficiaries: 6,000 people

Total amount of the project: 169,000 USD

Donor: FAO

- reconstruction of 80 home gardens and distribution of seeds and plants;
- reconstruction of 34 water harvesting units;
- distribution of 40 poultry rearing kits;
- distribution of 189 goats;
- construction of 1 fisheries community center;
- support for the implementation of activities for dry fish processing and the provision of dry fish kits for 174 women;
- organization of vocational training courses for 149 people.

- **Project of the Rehabilitation of Schools in Tsunami affected areas, Batticaloa District**



Direct beneficiaries: 5,000 students of primary schools and their teachers

Total amount of the project: 262,000 USD

Donor: WFP

Enhancement of the hygienic and food services in 13 schools in Batticaloa through the construction of:

- kitchens,
- storage areas,
- canteens,
- toilets,
- water systems.



SRI LANKA



Diary of a mission

by Riccardo Ducci, ASIA International Program Officer

I land in militarised and tensed Colombo, with the monsoon making the sky heavy and the traffic crazy, and black because of the car fumes. I have to turn the air conditioning on in the car to avoid choking.

This is the sixth time I have come to Sri Lanka. The first was in August 2005, after the tsunami, for the first project ASIA developed in the country. It involved the reconstruction of a village in Panadura, south of Colombo, which would house 130 families who had lost everything to the fury of the waves. Thinking of that period, one of the many difficulties we had to face was the organization of the resettlement. We had to recreate a liveable and dignified environment which would help create normal social and family relationships for those who had lost everything in the tsunami disaster.

Through funding from the Italian Cooperation, and in collaboration with the Italian NGO Ucodep, we built 130 new brick houses, in addition to water supplies, solar panels for energy, waste disposal, and social services—a community center and a kindergarten. The work started soon after the summer monsoon, in October 2005, and the keys were handed over to the local population just before the new monsoon, in July 2006.

While I was writing this article, I watched the ceremonies on TV that were held here in Italy for the handing over of 90 prefabricated houses to earthquake victims in Onna, Abruzzo.

Images of Panadura immediately came back to mind, like a parallel between two great disasters and two tangible results of solidarity. And I smiled at the thought that after all we achieved the same results in Sri Lanka (in fact, there we built 130 houses that were permanent and made with bricks) with far lesser resources and means.

The distance between the Colombo airport and Panadura—where ASIA headquarters have been since 2005—is relatively short, around 50 km, a 2 hour journey with stops at numerous checkpoints controlled by the Army and the Sinhalese police.

The Sri Lanka I see now is a country no longer at war, having won a conflict which lasted over 30 years, it defeated the LTTE Army—the so-called Tamil Tigers—in the northern provinces that they controlled and that are now under the control of government armed forces.

However, the Sri Lanka that welcomes me does not give the impression of a country at peace. The tension is high and there is a strong military presence. The army is proud of having defeated the enemy but is aware that from the ashes of the Tamil army, a new danger can emerge.

During its five years' presence in Sri Lanka, ASIA has worked both in the southwest, in the Kalutara, Galle, and Matara districts, in which the majority of the population is Sinhalese, and in the east, in the Batticaloa district, a majority Tamil area.

As an NGO, we have to deal with two different cultural and social contexts. While in the south-east we have been able to start post-Tsunami development programs within a context of quick recovery and return to normalcy, including tourism, in the east, ASIA has had to come to terms with the political and cultural complexities of the region, which has been the



battlefield between the Tigers Army, the government army and other paramilitary forces derived from divisions and rebellions for around 30 years.

The Sri Lankan ASIA staff is waiting for me at Panadura. Nandajith is the local coordinator and is a pillar for ASIA in the country, since he has been working with us since our arrival in May 2005. Our understanding of the country and the relationships we held with the local population derive from him and he is now an indispensable interlocutor for any negotiations with the counterpart or local stakeholders. The staff is also composed of a logician and a person responsible for social activities.

My arrival coincides with a transitional phase of our country representative, who is the expatriate officer of the ASIA projects. Pier Francesco, after more than two years in the field, leaves Sri Lanka and comes back to Italy. Thanks to him and his expertise as an architect, ASIA completed the construction of two multi-storied buildings—which today take in the new offices of two fishing cooperatives in Matara and Galle—and the construction of the above mentioned resettlement community center of Weragama.

Marco, the new officer, has to manage the projects left and, most importantly, complete the two projects on environmental protection and urban waste management in Panadura and one on micro-enterprise for women artisans in Galle. In these tasks, Marco has help from Federica, who is, in particular, responsible for the training of the women of the micro-enterprises and the training of the communities and schools working in the environmental projects.

The objective of my mission is twofold: first, to monitor the ongoing projects in the area of Panadura and Galle in the southwest and the work of the staff of our office of Panadura, and second, to check the possibility of starting new projects in Batticaloa in the east, at a time when the conflict has ended and the emergency of more than 300,000 displaced people can be brought to the attention of the NGOs at last.

Among the most meaningful new activities I have the pleasure to verify in this mission is the **new Bio-Gas facility in the Hospital of Panadura**: this system eliminates the organic waste produced by the hospital and transforms it into gas to supply the cookers of the hospital canteen.

This is an important intervention of Renewable Energy that ASIA chose to apply within a public health facility, thanks to the contribution of the Lazio Region.

In addition, the work of **environmental promotion in the schools of Panadura** is very interesting and innovative for ASIA because it developed a self-managed system of sorted garbage collection within each of the 4 schools involved in the program (around 2,500 students in total). Through the creation of management committees among the students and the provision of equipment for the collection and separation of paper, plastic and glass, the schools are developing the possibility of deriving economic benefits from selling recycled material; the proceeds will be invested in supplementary school activities. This intervention is also part of the environmental program of Panadura, funded by the Lazio Region.

Moving away from environmental issues to those of the **women's micro-enterprise**, the urgency now in Galle is consolidating the group of more than 200 women who, thanks to the funding of the Tuscany Region, attended the training courses and now are grouped into family micro-enterprises. Two women's cooperatives have been formed over the last months, and now it is time to accelerate their integration into the local market through a typical cooperative environment, which is used both as an exhibition and sale space for the handicrafts, and as a production laboratory.

The added value of this new initiative lies in its social function, because it will allow the women to meet and manage their own space, away from the social and cultural controls they are subjected to in their villages. A group of 30 active women took part in the identification of this new space, and, by December 2009, the project will inaugurate the *show room* of the women's artisan cooperatives in Galle.



Soon I will return to Sri Lanka, hoping to reap the benefits sown in Batticaloa, where we hope to resume our support, interrupted in 2007, of the primary schools in the areas affected by war. These poor schools located in rural areas do not have water or adequate healthcare systems and the children who attend them are at a high risk for malnutrition.

After three weeks I leave the country and head towards Burma, namely to the border between Thailand and Burma, where more than 180,000 Burmese refugees live in refugee camps in a situation of extreme emergency.

SRI LANKA

Sponsorship in Sri Lanka

Kindergartens in Urawatta and Weragama need our help so they can remain open!

Sponsor a child in Sri Lanka! With just 80c a day you can help us keep the school open, make sure the child grows in a safe place and give his or her mother the chance to work at building the family's future.



The campaign is still going on to help the children of the Kindergartens in Urawatta and Weragama in the southwest of Sri Lanka.

The kindergartens are facing great difficulties and, if we do not support them, they will have to close. For the villages of Weragama and Urawatta this would be a great problem. The kindergartens allow the women in the two communities to devote themselves to the activities of training and work in the cooperative of artisan crafts that is one of the primary sources of support for the two villages.

We need at least 20 new subscribers to make sure the two Kindergartens remain open for an entire year.

[ADOPT NOW!](#)

EVENTI & NEWS

- **Solidarity appetizer – Friday, 2 October – Rome**

A Solidarity appetizer and a crafts exhibition were held at the wine-gastronomy shop Il Ballo della Terra (Via dei Volsci 51, San Lorenzo – Rome). We enjoyed a wonderful buffet and had the opportunity to know and speak with each other. The proceeds of the event will be allocated to the projects of our association.

- **“Update on Galingteng College, Derge Tibetan Primary School and Khyungmo Bonpo College projects” – Saturday, 3 October, Merigar**

Andrea Dell’Angelo, ASIA Onlus director, introduced the last updates on Galingteng College, Derge Tibetan Primary School and Khyungmo Bonpo College projects. After the presentation, the movie **“We are no monks”** by the Tibetan director Pema Dhondup was screened.



- **Assembly of ASIA members – Monday, 5 October, Merigar**

The annual assembly of ASIA members was held in Merigar, during which the balance sheet of the year 2008 and the budget plan of the year 2009 were approved.

- **Exhibition “Contrasti” – from 28 November to 27 December, Brescia**

The black and white pictures made by Alberto Giuliani and Carlo Meazza offer a slice of Tibetan life and of the contrasts between tradition and modernity. The pictures show the dramatic situation of a people whose cultural and religious identity is threatened by homologation pushes, annihilating a millenary tradition.

The pictures will be exhibited from November 28th to December 27th at the Museo Nazionale della Fotografia, Brescia.

- **Publication of the booklet “Tibetan Arts in Transition” – available on request**

“Tibetan Arts in Transition – A Journey through Theatre, Cinema and Painting”.

The **booklet** on Tibetan arts is now ready. The booklet gathers the speeches of Tibetan and European artists and researchers given during the seminars and conferences held at the Università degli studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” and at the l’Università “Sapienza” di Roma within the development education project “The commitment of Italian NGOs in Tibet”.

To request a copy of the booklet, [click here!](#)

- **ASIA attended the 4th edition of the fair L’ISOLA CHE C’E’ – 19/20 September**

<http://www.lisolachece.org/>

For the second year, ASIA attended on 19th and 20th September the fair for solidarity relations and economics organized by the Province of Como.

The fair obtained an influx of 18.000 people, with the participation of 170 exhibitors.

Beyond the numbers, the protagonists of the weekend have been local solidarity and the wish to change, participate and live together an experience made unique by the enthusiasm and the joy of the thousands of people who, notwithstanding the clouds, enjoyed this event.

Despite the rainy weather (but many of the Como community are from the Woodstock era!!), the interest towards ASIA stand was more than satisfying, the visibility of our stand was well perceived, and we had the opportunity to establish new contacts with other associations and groups.

Our hope for the future is to have a wider stand, in order to exhibit ASIA gadgets and to have the possibility to organize screenings and areas to entertain the audience.

The Dzogchen community of Como.

* For translating this Newsletter we would like to thank Marta Medusa, Sandra Lanza, Serenella Ciongoli, Valeria Donati; and for proof reading thank Kathy Cullen.