

**Sri Lankan chronicle of deaths unforetold.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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TANGALLA, Sri Lanka, Jan 5 (Reuters) - From a few hundred feet up, with the breakers curling lazily on mile after mile of yellow sand beneath blue skies, it is easy to see why this teardrop-shaped island was once called Serendip.

But there was nothing serendipitous about the chaos and mayhem that came into sight on Wednesday as the Indian Air Force MI-8 helicopter swooped low over this once-idyllic fishing harbour at the very southern edge of Sri Lanka.

A little to its northwest, on the coastal road to Galle, the strip of beach called Hikkaduwa, once dotted with backpacker hostelries, now looked like a child had carelessly tossed a bucketful of Lego pieces across a sandlot.

To Tangalla's east, the towering sea had slammed in a few silent minutes into the town of Hambantota. Concrete and timber lay pell-mell, a couple of buses on their sides in the middle of a lagoon.

District officials carried little pads with statistics from hell. A total of 2,452 dead, said the lady in the white sari, the divisional secretary for Tangalla, D.W.S. De Silva.

Altogether 16,984 families had lost their homes to the angry sea, said M.A. Piyadasa, the Government Agent for Hambantota, of which 12,013 were fishermen's. A total of 78,968 people had been "displaced" and were in 27 camps, and 1,062 boats had been lost.

Commander Chamika Muthubandara, who ran the naval station of Ruhuna at Tangalla, said families used to picnic on the beach at his feet and use the cabanas to change.

Even now, 10 days after the cataclysm, people in Tangalla seemed terrified of the friend turned enemy.

"We never thought the sea would do this," Mrs De Silva said. "It was always our friend. It would be very difficult to bring back that feeling."

The tsunami struck on "poya", the Buddhist full-moon festival day. It was also a Sunday, and many fishermen had stayed home.

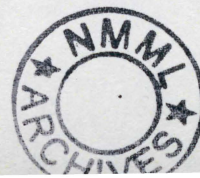
It struck at 9.20 in the morning, and so said a broken clock tied to a palm tree in the neighbourhood of Modarawatte, amid the rotting smells and the eerie silence of a place where more than 80 people died.

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In one of the houses that disappeared there, U.H. Padmini was cooking breakfast while her husband and her two children watched television. Suddenly the sea struck, and the children were gone.

They found their 12-year-old son later but could not take his broken body quickly enough to hospital.

"As we were running out of the back door, the sea came in through the front door and pulled us back. My husband was carrying my son and I was carrying my daughter. First we lost our son and a little later my daughter slipped out of my hands."



She was one of 110 people nibbling disconsolately at biscuits at the relief camp at the Moraketiara primary school. School reopens next Monday, and officials said the "displaced" would have to be found other housing.

This morning the helicopter had brought Nirupama Rao, India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka. She drove to Kudawella fishery harbour, where a Buddhist temple compound now buzzed with long lines of anxious survivors waiting for attention from a squad of Indian army doctors.

Lt.Col. R.T. Draper, commanding officer of the 4021 field ambulance unit, said his unit of 136 personnel including nine doctors and several dozen paramedics was seeing hundreds of people with routine medical problems - 1,100 on Tuesday, another 700 on Wednesday.

Draper had seen quite a bit of action with the Indian army but this was something new. "Did you see the TV tower at Hambantota? It was rolled up like a ball," he said.

Major P.K. Sahoo, who specialised in preventive medicine, said Indian soldiers had helped empty many wells full of filthy seawater, poured in bleaching powder, and readied them for clean groundwater to seep back in.

"There is no increase in diseases," he said. "And that is the greatest thing we can achieve - no epidemics."

Sahoo was worried about hepatitis, which has an incubation period of 15 to 20 days. The monsoon had just broken out, and the Indians were handing out insect repellants to stave off dengue and malaria.

"But I think we have prevented any epidemics," he said, narrating the story of an 11-year-old girl who lost both her parents and was then found to have a case of mumps. The doctors isolated her and her aunt.

"Hygiene, sanitation, water and overcrowding - these are the things we have to watch for," Sahoo said.

Later at the school a loudspeaker blared thanks to the Indians for coming to the aid of the Sri Lankans.

It was broadcast by a young lady wearing the colours of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, a hardline Sinhalese party that is now a government partner and not long ago had labelled the Indians imperialist aggressors. Things had changed.

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