

President's Report of Annual Visit to Sri Lanka (Sept. 25 to Oct. 8, 2006)

It was my great pleasure to be in Sri Lanka once again from September 25 to October 8 for my annual visit and on-site audit. This report describes some of the activities undertaken during the visit by myself and by VeAhavta volunteers Tori Wynn and Sam Larkin of San Luis Obispo.

We were met at the airport in Colombo by Rev. Earl Solomon, a pastor with the Church of South India. (Rev. Dr. Jeyanesan was in the Netherlands but met up with us later in Trincomalee.) Rev. Solomon was kind enough to escort us from the airport to Batticaloa. The journey took a bit longer than usual due to stops at several military and police checkpoints along the way.

September 25-29 were spent at St. John's Center in Batticaloa. Our biggest goals while at St. John's were to distribute food for needy refugees for two days and to obtain photographs and biographical data on all of the children at St. John's Girls Home (102 children) and Sinnannan Girls Home in Kiran (46 children) so that they could all be offered for sponsorship through the VeAhavta website. Both goals were accomplished. I am particularly grateful to Sam and Tori for taking all of the photographs of the children.

During one day of our food distribution in Batticaloa, we were graciously assisted by a Sri Lankan Army office named Major W.S.A. Wijetunge. Despite whatever ethnic tensions exist in eastern Sri Lanka, he clearly had a genuine desire to help and even handed out food packets himself to the predominantly Tamil people in the camp (Major Wijetunge was Sinhalese). Sadly, the day we left Trincomalee to come back to the U.S., Rev. Solomon called and informed us that Major Wijetunge was killed in a battle that occurred not far from the refugee camp. He was only 38 years old and left behind a wife and two young children. His loss was a shock to all of us and a reminder of how close the war can get.

We left Batticaloa on Sept. 29 with Rev. Solomon and Mr. David, Vice-Principal of the St. John's Vocational Training Center, and arrived at the Grace Care Center on the same day. Once again, the traveling took longer than usual due to the additional security checkpoints we had to negotiate.

On Saturday, Oct. 1, between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m., the Grace Girls Home children hosted an ice cream social for the children of the Sivananda Thapovanam and Ravatha orphanages located in Trincomalee. All of the children got along well and seemed to have a wonderful time playing in the park, talking and singing. The Grace girls were very hospitable hosts and made many new friends.

On the morning of Sunday, Oct. 2, the Grace Girls Home participated in a netball tournament and St. Mary's College in Trincomalee. The girls played well in the

tournament and had lots of fun. Unfortunately, we were unable to attend the awards ceremony later that afternoon due to an Army/police blockade along the road into Trincomalee. They were apparently diffusing a claymore mine that was found in a shop not far from the Care Center.

At various times throughout the day at Grace, we could hear the sound of mortar fire and rocket launches. The sounds were not loud but they were fairly regular and served as a reminder of what was happening in the “real world” outside the compound. Other than these sounds, the incident with the claymore mine on the Trinco road and the increased military presence, the situation in Trincomalee seemed fairly quiet and stable during our visit.

On Oct. 3, I met with Father Lorio of the Jesuit Academy to deliver some English films he had requested for the school. Father Lorio is doing well although he is understandably very concerned about the political situation in Trincomalee and the escalating violence. Busy as usual, Fr. Lorio is hosting a large number of refugees at the Academy and is doing his best to teach them all English.

Diane McLaughlin and I also met with Mrs. Jothinathan, the Principal of the Methodist Girls' College that most of the Grace Home children attend. We discussed the children's recent school performance and I was very happy to learn that most of the kids are doing well and have shown tremendous academic improvement from the year before. My special thanks to Diane, Erin Whaley and Dr. Bonnie Nuzum for all of their hard work as members of the VeAhavta Education Committee. The children's academic performance could not have improved so much without their dedication and loving attention to the children's needs.

In furtherance of our goal of developing the House of Peace Ecumenical Center (“HOPE Center”) on the Grace property, I met with several different clerics from the different faith communities in Trincomalee throughout the week, including Bishop Kingsley, the Roman Catholic Bishop for the Trincomalee/Batticaloa Diocese. I presented each of the clerics with a copy of VeAhavta's 3-page “Conceptual Plan” for HOPE Center in an effort to secure their support for the project. The proposal was signed by Bishop Kingsley and approved but not yet signed by the Hindu cleric, Swami Ravichchandra Kurukkal; the Buddhist and Muslim clerics – neither of whom had previously seen the document or met with me – agreed to review it carefully and get back to me.

We distributed food packets to refugees in Kinniya and in Trincomalee town for two days. Before starting each distribution, the people receiving the packets were told that the funds used to purchase them came from donors in the U.S., and that a substantial portion of the funds also came from the Islamic Center of San Luis Obispo, along with prayers for peace from their Muslim brothers and sisters. All of the food packets were gratefully received.

During the week we also distributed new school backpacks and sweaters to the Grace Girls Home children. (Believe it or not, it can get chilly for the kids during winter evenings!) The backpacks were generously donated by Ernie Roide of Promotion Plus in San Luis Obispo and were met with many smiles from the children. Along with the backpacks came a donation of pencils and erasers that were given by two of my nephews – Benjamin and Jacob Peterson of San Luis Obispo. Donations for the sweaters were arranged by Tori Wynn and family and came from several generous donors in the San Luis Obispo area. The children were very grateful for all of the gifts.

Friday, Oct. 6 was a school holiday so we took the Grace Home children and staff on a fieldtrip to swim in the pool at the Mauro Beach Hotel in Nilaveli, located about 12 miles north of the Grace Care Center. The hotel was empty so the children – who had never been swimming in a pool before – had the facility all to themselves. And they had a blast! Some of the kids remained in the shallow end of the pool much of the time but many used the opportunity to improve their swimming and water polo skills. The hotel management also opened up the beach so that the kids could go back-and-forth between the swimming pool and the ocean. Towards the end of the four-hour trip, the kids enjoyed soft drinks and snacks in the hotel dining area. The Sinhalese hotel manager and employees were very surprised when the children all thanked them for the hospitality by singing a song in Sinhala just before we left. I was very proud of the kids for doing their part to reach out to others across ethnic boundaries. It was a memorable day for all.

On Saturday, Oct. 7, the children and staff of the Grace Girls Home and Grace Daycare conducted a sports meet at the Care Center. Rev. Dr. S. Jeyanesan was emcee for the event and the “Chief Guest” was Bishop Kingsley who gave an inspiring address. Other guests attending included: Father Lorio and Father Leo and several nuns and staff from the St. Joseph’s elder home, which is located just a short distance from Grace. The kids ran races, gave athletic demonstrations and played games. Everyone had a marvelous time, including the several families from area refugee camps who attended the event.

Following the sports meet, graduation ceremonies were conducted for students of the Grace Vocational Training Center and the students also put on a show to display and sell some of the items they made at the VTC.

That afternoon, Sam Larkin and I installed a floating buoy line that is anchored by two cement-filled buckets in about five feet of water off the beach at Grace. The line was suggested by VeAhavta volunteer Tom McLaughlin who noticed that the kids were swimming more. The line – which can be taken in and out of the water easily – will function as a boundary marker for the kids when they swim and will provide them with something to grab onto for flotation in the event they ever need it.

That same evening the Grace Home girls put on a talent show for the guests and other residents, including the residents and staff of Mercy Home. The show lasted for over two hours and most of the children participated in one way or another. The children sang songs, danced, made speeches and recited poetry (in Tamil and in English) and put on plays. The drama team of Mercy Home staffers Marimuthu Wijiyavickram and Sinnathambi Rameswaran (“Wicky and Romesh”) performed a thoughtful and moving play that was translated for me by Rev. Jeyanesan.

And, of course, following the talent show, we danced! I tried to expand the children’s musical horizons by playing several classic western rock-n-roll songs for them but, by the time the evening was over, the little music critics had clearly informed me in their own subtle little ways that the music I brought was not quite to their liking. They preferred their own music, thank you very much, so that’s mostly what we danced to. Kids today! What will they listen to next.

On Sunday, Oct. 8, we left Trincomalee for the Colombo airport following an emotional farewell.