

Faces of Peace

Saving a War-Torn Childhood

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Tsunami Families Struggle as Conflict Rages

(Faces of Peace editor Deborah Wilson interviewed Ishan Rasheed, voluntary chaperone for the Sri Lankan children, about the current situation in the small island nation off the coast of India).

DW: Could you tell us something about the civil war in Sri Lanka?

IR: The Liberation Tamil Tigers (LTT) have been fighting to form a separate state on the island of Sri Lanka for 30 years. Trincomalee where the children are from is a major port in the area where the LTT is active.

DW: What effect has this had on the country?

IR: The LTT is considered a terrorist organization and they have wrought havoc. Leaders and journalists have been assassinated because they want peace. There have been bombings in Colombo, the capital city.

The LTT carried out an aerial bombing during this year's World Cup of Cricket. Everyone was indoors watching the Sri Lankan team play in the final, when the bombing took place. The army fired back and many civilians were killed. There are bombings on busses; there have been five car bombs recently in Colombo. The business climate is very depressed, and many professional people have left the country.

DW: How did the Tsunami of December 2004 affect the state of conflict?

IR: When the Tsunami hit everyone pulled together, rich and poor, Tamil Tigers and the army...from 2004 to 2006 there was complete peace.

DW: What can you tell us about the situation of the children who visited Waterport last summer?

IR: I haven't been able to go visit them because it is too dangerous. I have talked with them on the phone. Their families are fishermen. They are simple people, not professionals. There is a lot of yellow fin tuna in Trincomalee, which can be exported. But because of the military activity, commercial fishing is pretty much at a standstill. The families who survived the Tsunami are back to subsistence fishing for their families. Poor people seem to get nothing to help them. Some have become refugees again because of the military activity.

DW: What did the children tell you about the Tsunami?

IR: When the water went out from the beaches, everyone ran into the sea—to see the seabed—and then the waves came, three times.

DW: What about this year's children?

IR: Safan's father was shot when Safan was about 5 years old. There were 81 other unarmed people, total civilians, shot by the LTT that day.

Haseena's parents both died in a fire. Haseena attends the same school as Kaleef and Irshad (Project Life 2006). When they came back the whole village was talking about their trip to Project Life. That's when Haseena made up her mind to come, even though it's unusual for a girl to travel. I talked to her family and assured them that we are doing this work with our whole hearts; she will go back with new knowledge and we will keep in touch with her.



Kaleef, Irshad and chaperone Ishan prior to leaving for their trip to the U.S. in August 2006.

DW: How do the local people respond to Project Life?

IR: Children in Sri Lanka are not getting any therapy or their needs addressed. Their parents are in a depressed state because of their losses. The children just have to survive as best they can. Our organization has a reputation now for actually doing something to help people. Plus the staff in the U.S. Embassy is saying we have a wonderful program.

DW: What was your biggest challenge this year?

IR: We had quite a few challenges getting passports, it's so tightly controlled at the moment.

DW: What are your thoughts about child selection for next year?

IR: For next year, I think we might try selecting children from Putlam, that's a town where many Tsunami victims who were living the middle of the LTT activity have fled as refugees.

How two Project Life boys survived Asian Tsunami

(UB graduate student and Project Life volunteer David E. Bell formally interviewed our two young Tsunami survivors in fall 2006, just before they left western New York. Two members of their N.Y. host family participated as interpreters. The following is a portion of that conversation, as translated. Bracketed words added for clarity).

The Tsunami came at 9:55 a.m. (The boys) say that when there is a fair sized storm, the sea laps at their home, that is how close their houses are built to the coast.

One of the boys said his mother ran through the coast saying, “the sea is coming, the sea is coming!” His father grabbed him and put him in a boat...the boat went into the water...(the boy) got out.

When he was floating, a man tied himself to a rope, and then tied himself to a tree, and then grabbed on to (the boy). He didn't know (the man), and the man didn't know him...(The man was just) hanging off the tree, (and) grabbed his leg.

(Meanwhile) his father took the younger brother, the five year old, and swam in the water...As the water was receding, he kept trying to stay afloat, with the five year old in his arms.

His mother grabbed his sister... her hair got caught to the fence...she got stuck there with the three year old in her arms...and she went under water. (Later) they took her to the hospital, but the ones who drank the water had become poisoned.

So, all of these people are dying...they have turned purple... and they have declared them dead. At the time, all of the looters came and took all of their possessions. All the people that had died, they brought them to the hilltop.

The other boy ran away from the sea...to the main road...they could see the sea coming, so they ran.

(One of the boy's) house is completely gone, and (the other boy's house), there are some walls remaining.

Everyone that went into the sea, was recovered...they came washed back. Everyone was accounted for...everyone who died and didn't die. Both boys lost a mother and a sister each. And one also lost his grandmother.

They were able to retain their land, but they cannot build...there are land laws...they have to build one kilometer away. (Their original land) they can use to grow coconuts.

The whole thing lasted only five minutes, hanging dangling for five minutes...gazing toward the sea.



Welcome to our new season!

A little bit about the orphans of summer 2007

Project Life 2007 was launched mid-July with the arrival of Haseena, 11, and Safan, 12, from Sri Lanka. Chaperone Ishan A. Rasheed is visiting us for the second year in a row. Both children speak Tamil but understood a little English on arrival, making their adjustment easier.

Nine days later we greeted four new Afghan refugee children when chaperone Hajara Huzair returned with them from Pakistan. Dostam, Ismail, Obaidullah, and Hameedullah range in age from 11 to 13. All attend school in Peshawar, Pakistan, and have also had the benefit of learning a little English prior to arrival. Their home languages are Pashto and Farsi (Dari). Long-term visitors to Project Life, Sabir and Fauzia of Afghanistan, remain with us while Sabir's medical treatment at the Hemophilia Center continues. Sabir and Fauzia have played a big part in making the four boys feel at ease in their new environment.

At the time of this writing the arduous process of obtaining visas for four new Chechen children, three girls and one boy, has finally been completed. We expect them to arrive just after Labor Day.

Most of the children will depart Waterport mid-October, while the Chechen children will stay until early November.

Q & A about Project Life

WHOM DO WE SERVE? Orphaned children of war and natural disaster. Our current focus is on orphans of Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Sri Lanka. Children are 9 to 13-year-olds with high socio-economic, psychological, and emotional needs. All children live with family members in their home countries. We do not select children from orphanages or seek permanent fostering or adoption for them in the United States.

WHY? We aim to provide peace and support for each child's rest and recuperation from trauma. Our program improves physical and psychological health, builds trust and confidence, and inspires new hope for the future. Project Life also gives orphans a chance to "just be kids" again.

HOW? A three-month program of education, recreation and health care, along with hosting by volunteer American families in the western New York region. All children return to their families overseas at the completion of the program period.

ABOUT OUR ORGANIZATION: Project Life is an entirely volunteer-run program of World Life Institute, a registered 501(c)3 organization based in Waterport, N.Y. Project Life is supported wholly by private donations from individuals, businesses, service clubs, and congregations.

OUR RECORD: From 1997 to 2007 Project Life has sponsored more than 90 international orphans to its program in western New York State.

News and Notes

► Save the Date! Our Tenth Anniversary celebration and 11th Project Life Graduation will be held Sunday September 30, 3 to 5 p.m. at World Life Institute, Waterport. A book of reminiscences about Project Life will be launched, hot off the press, and there will be presentations and refreshments for the whole family!

► Six orphans and several volunteers enjoyed a fully sponsored week of recreation in the Washington, D.C. area, as guests of the Benjamin B. French Masonic Lodge. Look for details in our next issue.

► We welcome donations of food and clothing for the orphans. Please call first to inquire about specific needs. Financial donations toward general expenses are also appreciated.

► Let us know if you would like to help support a child once they return home. All of Project Life's financial resources and energy go toward our core program. But in some cases we can help make connections when orphans need ongoing help. For example, several of Project Life's Afghan children are currently benefiting from better education because of the generosity of individuals who met them through Project Life. Bosnian orphans who visited Waterport 1997 to 2003 have continued to receive visits from our volunteers, and some had the chance to attend an international youth camp in Croatia this summer. We can also help deliver small packages or letters when our volunteers travel to see children in their home countries.

Team reaches city of Grozny for first time in eight years

(Naila Shakoor has volunteered for Project Life since she was a young teen in 1997. In April she traveled overseas for the program for the first time. The following are excerpts from our interview with her).

First Reactions: The first thing I noticed (in Moscow) was that everyone is busy and in a hurry—cars weaving in and out of traffic, the driving is crazy, no one slows down for you. The hardest thing was the bad state of hygiene—the sidewalks are not in good shape, everyone spits on them, we found a cockroach in our restaurant food!

English isn't spoken so commonly in Russia, compared with other parts of Europe.

Visit to refugee area, Nazran: (After Moscow) we landed in Nazran, Ingushetia (near Chechnya). In Moscow everyone keeps to themselves, no one is friendly or courteous. But a stranger on the plane to Nazran stood up and said, "Welcome to Ingushetia!" They realized we were visitors and it was so nice.

(I was told that) the camps near Nazran are dramatically smaller than they used to be. There might be 60 or 100 people living where there used to be thousands. It was cold and rainy, lots of mud puddles.



Naila Shakoor embraces a happy Abubeker ('05) during the April trip to Chechen capital Grozny. Many displaced families have returned to the Grozny area over the past few years. It was the first time in eight years that our team of volunteers was allowed into the city, which is now being re-built after years of war.

We stayed with friends in a walled compound, where we felt very safe. It was hard not to have the freedom to walk around. We had to be driven everywhere. There was a risk of kidnapping—for money or politics. Local women are sometimes kidnapped for marriage.

A warm welcome: The poverty got to me—sometimes there was no running water, and there is no money to fix or renovate anything. But despite this the care given to guests is remarkable. They may be impoverished but that doesn't stop them from being generous and serving you. Kindness...and not just from the people we know personally.

We were greeted by Project Life children Adam L., Larisa, and Ramzan at the airport. Later we saw Khava, Belkis, and Zalina. Karina was away visiting her aunt.

Trip to Grozny under police escort: We spent 4-5 days trying to find a way to get to Grozny, Chechnya. Finally we managed, being taken by a police escort. The whole time we were visiting the city and on the way back we witnessed the re-building. We saw lots of Russian checkpoints but didn't have to stop because of the escort.

We met the Deputy Administrator of Humanitarian Projects, and were interviewed for the Grozny newspaper and TV and radio.

We saw Project Life children Iman, Ayub and brother Islam, Larisa, and Abubeker. Larisa seemed very well. It was cute... her sister had been to Spain and several other kids also spoke Spanish so I was able to (talk) with them.

Lasting impressions: It was really interesting to meet the moms and families and get a feel for the kids' lives. We (in Project Life) are so connected with the children and yet have not met the family members before. We may think we know the kids, but they have a whole other life we don't know about. It makes it clear why it is so important to send the kids back. They have someone who nourishes them and cares about them, and provides for them even if there is poverty. There isn't a need for us to adopt them. We might have an idea that we're bringing orphans who have nothing—but they *do* have a lot back home that is so meaningful. Our program of course focuses on what the kids *don't* have.

Difficult farewells: For the people I connected with there, I wish the distance and access was not so much work. I wished that I could get to them more easily. I wish for them to have more freedom rather than the isolation they live in. They have to live it while we can just walk in and walk out.

WORLD LIFE INSTITUTE is a 501(c)3 organization which founded Project Life War Orphans Rehabilitation Program.

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In our 11th year of service to international war orphans