

# Tsunami children suffer from stress disorder

By Shahid Husain

*15/3/05*  
*Children Daily Times*  
**GALLE:** Many children in Sri Lanka who witnessed the tsunami disaster on December 26 but mercifully survived, are now suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"As many as 1949 children in the southern province of Sri Lanka, many of whom lost their mother or father or both parents, are now faced with post-traumatic stress disorder," Dr TSD Amarasekera, a paediatrician and senior registrar at Karapitiya Teaching Hospital in Galle, told Daily Times.

"These children are under 18 and are getting psychiatric help," he added. "They were scared of water and suffered from insomnia and irritability. They were also frightened. But now they are calming down. We have established 100 psychosocial centres across the country where the traumatised children are being looked after with the help of UNICEF by medical graduates who have been trained to help children suffering from trauma," he said.

"These children refuse to swim. They are scared of water. The other-

wise soothing sound of waves disturbs them," said PH Gamini Gunasinghe, director of a beautiful beach resort in Galle, known as Sri Gamunu. "These children are our future. If we lose them we will lose our future," he said.

"Dumping the tsunami debris is yet another problem the government of Sri Lanka is facing today," he said, adding that his country had lost much of its tourist business.

"You can imagine it from the fact that our beach resort would normally have a 90 percent occupancy rate during the season (November to March). Currently, we only have 10 percent occupancy."

Gunasinghe observed that Sri Lanka's fishermen had been badly hurt. Besides, those middlemen, who ensured the availability of vegetables, fruits and other commodities from villages to towns and cities, had also suffered from the disaster.

"People are still in a state of panic," he said. "I know that many of them have kept their valuables in a bag — just in case there is an emergency again and they want to run."

Thousands of people including men, women and children, uprooted

by the tsunami disaster, have been moved to tents provided by non-governmental organisations. Mercifully there has been no epidemic but doctors warn of trouble ahead.

"At the moment there is no problem, especially in the health sector. We have a surveillance system and there has not been any epidemic so far. But we fear people might catch Japanese Encephalitis and Dengue after rains," said Dr PL Gunawardana, deputy provincial director health services, based in Galle.

He said that electricity and telecommunication systems were disrupted after the disaster but the government had been able to contain the crisis. "It was my job to clean the wells which were contaminated by the tsunami," he said.

"There was a swift community response. People on their own started providing relief to the tsunami victims even before the government responded," Gunawardana recalled.

But he cautioned that the trouble is not over. "Rainy season is coming. There will be more breeding of mosquitoes, which may even cause an epidemic."

Visits to camps where tsunami victims have been shifted were painful and agonising. But even the battered people have not lost their spirit of generosity.

KG Nadeeka Dilan, a motor mechanic, who lost his 13-year-old daughter, got aluminium shed from a foreigner but donated it to a small Montessori in the refugee camp. Sri Lanka's well-known NGO, Sarvodaya Sharmadana Sangamaya, which distributed tents and other items from the Church World Service Pakistan-Afghanistan, provided special training to a teacher and three helpers. They presently teach 21 tsunami-affected children at the Montessori.

Dilan was bitter about the "lack of positive response" from the government. "I will protest, block the road and put our tents there if no help came from the government," he pledged.

The tsunami victims, who are condemned to live in tents under a scorching sun, badly need help. The infrastructure requirements of the country have also increased, especially in the water and sanitation sector, which, if went unattended, may trigger another crisis.