



## Hikkaduwa - after the tsunami

Letters from Hikkaduwa

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### March 6th, 2005

Dear friends & family,

Although it in some ways feels like ages ago that I was running up the road for safety, Sri Lanka is still very much marked by the tsunami two and a half months back. While tents and temporary shelters mushroom in the tsunami-hit villages, it is still too early to talk of real development in most parts of Sri Lanka. It is in many ways a very confusing period, and the only thing I know is that nothing will ever become totally the same. Not in Sri Lanka, and not in me.

There are, however, positive aspects too. For example, Ranjith re-opened his restaurant last week by the help of the whole family's old fridges and kitchen utensils, a few tables and chairs - and a lot of loans here and there. Some of his regulars even have returned to Sri Lanka, and the restaurant is if not busy, then at least running. Tonight, I am invited for a small party there, but not by Ranjith.

Because: Friday I went to Colombo to withdraw 2,328,565 Rupees collected by all of you, and I even got 113,734 Rupees as direct cash donations, thus now I have begun to distribute the money.

As Manel already received his million yesterday, he has invited me for tonight's party, where I have to represent all of you. Can you imagine how much Arrack that will take? Gosh. It is going to be a long night, and yet I have to be awake by tomorrow morning, where Ranjith has told he will come for his 1,322,300 Rupees.

All this means that Manel is now in the mode of reconstructing his iron workshop. Still, it sits as a basis and a couple of salt water broken machines in the outskirts of Hikkaduwa. As the government has declared that no one is allowed to reconstruct within a 100 meter buffer zone from the sea, he even has to buy new land somewhere in the jungle, but he claims that the million you gave is enough to cover it all. For him it means that he now will be able to keep his two children studying, and at the same time provide for his sister's family, whose husband is disabled, and his own parents. It also means that

Manel's four employees may keep their jobs in an area where it is even at the best of times almost impossible to find proper work.

He came by today to repeat his thanks, and he wants to write a letter to all of his sponsors. As I do not have all e-mail addresses, I have promised him to post it on my web-site along with photos which I will take later today.

For Ranjith, the donations are equally important. Although he on the surface seems much better off, as he is having access to loans from old school mates, and as he is already up and going again, there are many people depending on him. Apart from his own family, which includes three kids, his two brothers and their families also depend on the income from the restaurant. On top of that, Ranjith normally employs about seven people. He told me that first thing will be to buy fridges, freezers, cooking utensils and whatever else is needed to cater for hungry tourists.

As the money collection went beyond all expectations, I will do as I pledged in the now outdated appeal which was previously posted on my web: I will give a bit of money to my friends Raja and Malaka too. I have decided to give each of them 60,000 Rupees.

Raja is a jeweller, and he lost his entire silver collection to the sea, while his little factory experienced extensive water damage. He has applied for loans to restart his production, but as he is also within the 100 meter buffer zone, it is unlikely that he will get anything granted.

Raja's young assistant, 26 year old Malaka, is even worse off. He lost his parents and grandfather along with his home. Now, he is in charge of his two kid siblings, and although friends have enabled him to buy a small piece of land outside the buffer zone and others have pledged to build a house for him, he still misses all the essentials as a fridge, furniture, clothes, towels, pots and pans and many, many more things.

And your donations have even further impact. Every time a family like Ranjith's, Manel's, Raja's or Malaka's return to a bit of normalcy, it also means that they get the wheels going elsewhere in the area. When Ranjith's Beach Hut is working, Ranjith shops in the market, in the wine shop, in the meat shop and with the fishermen. When Raja is producing jewellery, he keeps more than half a dozen of people busy in his factory. All of them are also buying services for reconstruction from various people, and both Manel and Raja needs raw materials for their business.

So once again: THANKS!!! Thanks for bringing normalcy to Hikkaduwa. Thanks for helping your and mine friends back to life. Thanks for your patience and trust in me.

I have not been as good at updating my web as I thought I would, and there are many excuses for this, the main one being that the psychological affects of the tsunami have been more taxing than I could ever imagine. As most of you know, I am used to working in crisis situations with people experiencing severe trauma, but this is very different.

Some weeks back I met a Danish woman, who also works with development issues, and she put it this way: "It is very strange suddenly to be the survivor and not the person who supports the survivors". I have tried to be both here in Hikkaduwa, and I realise that I do not have the strength any longer. Subsequently, I have decided to go to Denmark for a while. This is possible as the job with Danish People's Aid did not work out as expected.

Thus, I just have to finalise the distribution of money, update my web-site, look for jobs (do you know of any?) work 10 days for LO-FTF Council (Ulandssekretariatet) in Bangkok, buy a ticket - and soon meet all my Danish friends and family.  
That will be SO good.

Love  
Lotte

## February 13th, 2005

Dear friends,

A couple of weeks have passed since my last mail, and I have noticed via the Internet that the tsunami is more or less off the media outside Sri Lanka. Here, however, it is still the only front page news, and with good reason: The island is far from recovered yet.

I have received mails from many of you being concerned about how I cope, and it is indeed taxing to be here in the middle of mayhem non-stop. I actually did end up escaping after the sorrow seemed to continue to grow inside followed by my life's first anxiety attack. Initially, I thought that some days in Colombo would do, but I realised I badly needed to get out of the tsunami zone all together. Although Colombo is not really affected, all Sri Lankans are reacting strongly to this national disaster, and subsequently no-one really had the surplus to deal with all my emotions. I could not even really blame them, only take the consequence and go to Bangkok, where a very good Danish friend and old colleagues happened to be around.

After having been nursed round the clock for five days, I am now home in Hikkaduwa, and that is just OK! I look forward a lot to get back to the psychosocial programme for the kids in the camps, but before that, I have a lot of unfinished pieces of business.

Amongst them is the fundraising for Ranjith and Manel. Although I officially closed the collection a while ago, some friends have had trouble transferring money from where ever they are in the world. Thus, I am still awaiting the final three pledged donations, before I transfer the money to Sri Lanka, which will also take some time. But I will keep you posted on the progress, and sooner or later the promised photos of the donation ceremony will be to be found on my web-site.

So far, I am about to list all the contributors on my web, and I can also tell you that while Manel's workshop is still non-existing, he is making a living as a driver for Danish People's Aid, the same organisation I do the children's programme with. And Ranjith, knowing that he will receive all your donations very soon, has borrowed a lot of money and plans to re-open the restaurant soon. This makes sense. If he were to wait for the donations to come, he would miss out on the entire dry season here, and consequently be in a lot of economic trouble during the rains. Photos from his re-build restaurant will soon be on my web-site.

When all that is said, there are very few tourists around, and although many places in the southern and less damaged villages of Hikkaduwa are open again, many of them in severely cut down versions, the ambience is very different from a normal peak season. There are foreigners around, but most of them are here to work, thus they do not hang out the entire night like the usual tourist. But after all, it means that at least some people in the tourist areas do have an income now, although less than usual.

The real problem now is the majority, those who are left behind in temples and schools, or who have been provided with tents only, or are about to get a temporary wooden shelter. The fishermen, the craftsmen, the ordinary villagers, who are still without a living. How they will cope in the future is hard to predict.

I find it tough enough to cope with the sight of empty plots all along the coast, which used to be teeming with activities and villages. With the tents that must be intolerable to stay in when it is 30-something degrees and the humidity next to a 100 percent. And with the families, who still just sit there, on the leftovers of their houses. Gradually, even the rubble is removed, thus they only have the foundations left. Or - only sand.

I will never forget this woman and her daughter sitting next to the remains of their house in a village just north of Hikkaduwa town: A corner of a house seen from the inside, a kitchen table and half a wall clad in pink tiles. A tiny reminder of a privacy that does not exist any more.

Still, they have the energy to wave and smile every time I pass.

Love  
Lotte

## January 28th, 2005

Dear friends,

The one-month anniversary of the tsunami along with two deadlines for the money collection for Manel and Ranjith have passed. As they really, really need the money urgently, and as we actually almost have reached the targeted amount, I have decided to transfer the money by the end of next week. Thus the absolutely last deadline for your money transfer is now:

Monday 31st

If some of you cannot manage to transfer by that date, I suggest that you instead donate the money for the project I have described in the previous mail: A psychosocial programme for children affected by the tsunami. Through games, play, reading, drawing and child rights awareness about 500 children in two camps in Hikkaduwa will hopefully regain a bit of their happiness and recover from their tsunami trauma. I will be working on this programme for the next six months, employed by the small NGO Danish People's Aid, which is also constructing temporary shelters along with water and sanitation for 1000 families in the same communities.

These are the aims so far, but as with any other type of projects carried out by NGOs, the amount of money fundraised corresponds the activities. Thus, the more support, the greater a number of people will benefit.

So far, we have found six wonderful Sri Lankan women and some foreign volunteers to work with the kids, and we have delivered the first van load of toys, sport equipment, kids and youth novels plus stationary. Initially, the children are just to play, and when they are ready, we will try to guide them through their trauma so they subsequently get rid of the nightmares, fears and sorrow.

Furthermore, I have spoken to one of Sri Lanka's few good psychologists, and he may be willing to help the kids, whose needs are beyond our basic activities. At the same time, one of the volunteers, Louise, have got hold of a troupe of jugglers and magicians, who will spend the next days in the camps.

And when I return from Colombo, where I am staying right now in order to recover a bit personally, I will start working on the trauma rehabilitation modules.

As usual, I am to do a bit of information work too, which will be done in co-operation with my old employer from Bangladesh, Ulandssekretariatet (LO-FTF Council). This, will however, only be in Danish, which is also the case for Danish People's Aid's website: [www.asf.dk](http://www.asf.dk), where the organisation is collecting donations for the programme. But I will try to keep you updated on the progress, and hopefully I will also be able to provide you with an account number for international transfers.

I will obviously also take photos of the day when I present all your money to Ranjith and Manel. So please keep checking my web-site.

Warm regards,  
Lotte

## **January 20th, 2005**

First of all: Thanks so much for your overwhelming support to the Ranjith and Manel fundraising event. As it is, we are approaching 13,444 Euro, and with the money people have pledged on top of that, we are very close to the targeted 16,800 rupees needed to reconstruct restaurant as well as iron workshop. As both Ranjith and Manel need the money urgently, I please request you to keep the deadline for latest transfers:

24. January

About one week after this date I will transfer all the money to Sri Lanka and hand over the full amount to the rightful owners.

Furthermore, I have received several mails requesting news on the development here - about the buffer zone and in general. Apart from extreme busyness - I'll come back to that later - I have not written, as there is no news to pass on. The Sri Lankan government seems not to be able to make up its mind about how wide the zone is to be, and in the meantime people are clearing and reconstructing whatever they can on the beach. And in the areas without tourist industry, the fishermen are moving back and forth depending on whether the police is in the area or not. I have noted that many of them recently have moved into temporary shelters donated by local, unscathed villagers, and personally I do believe that the government is bound to loose this battle in the long run.

Some of you have also requested new photos, which I have not really been able to provide yet. As it is, this entire week I have been rushed off my feet in order to create a psycho-social programme for children in tsunami affected areas. It is to be carried out along with the NGO Danish People's Aid's shelter programme in some of the totally devastated villages north of Hikkaduwa town, where thousands of people live in refugee camps or temples.

Initially, I hesitated a bit, as I felt I did not have the energy to commit to such a huge and important task, but with enormous support from two Danish volunteers, Jens and Jens (no, it is not a joke. They are both called Jens) who were also here during the tsunami, I have managed to get things going. We have so far developed a small project document outlining what the contents of the programme could be - play, games along with various therapeutic-like activities, e.g. drawing, drama and child rights empowerment, so the children may be able to face the difficult future. We also sketched our proposed

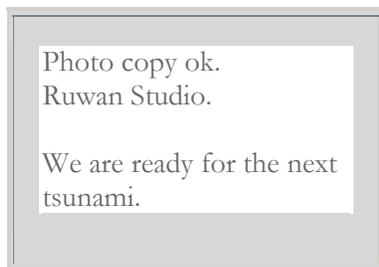
budgets last night (late!), and, well, let's see how it works out. So far, it seems like I may become the coordinator for the next six months.

Personally, it has been such a relief to get out of this feeling of being totally paralyzed by grief, which I have been in the previous three weeks, and this project certainly makes sense, although I never thought that I was going to work in Hikkaduwa. Basically, life has changed radically for everyone here within those few tsunami-minutes, and that is a fact that I gradually get to live with.

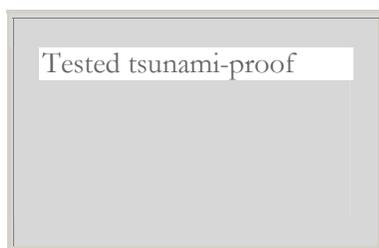
On the even more positive side is that at least some of the people in the tourist business are regaining their strength too, and this coming weekend it has been announced that as much as two party places are re-opening. Friday Vibrations have invited all the aid workers for free drinks, as this place has not really suffered any damage. And Saturday Saman may open his new, little wooden bar in Top Secret. If someone had invited me just five days ago, I would have refused to go, but guess what? Suddenly the prospect of having a bit of fun again is not that terrifying. I think we all need it. Not the least the bar owners, whom otherwise will not have any income.

That the situation is improving slightly was even more visible on the beach yesterday sunset, where Jens and Jens went surfing, and I just went for a small walk. For the first time since the tsunami, lots of Sri Lankans, foreign aid workers and even a few tourists were there - playing cricket in the sand, jogging, talking - and laughing. What was unthinkable nearly four weeks ago is not unimaginable anymore. Even some of the kids in the refugee camp, where I am to work with Danish People's Aid - and they come from really, really smashed areas where not one, single building is erect - told that they would like to return to play on the beach.

Somehow, Sri Lankans have a resilience that I as an over-protected Danish citizen cannot grasp. But at least I can enjoy it. For example: When my sister Trine visited me on her single holiday from her work with WHO last weekend and we walked all the way through Hikkaduwa and all the villages north of the town, we saw this small, handwritten sign board next to the ruined photo copy shop, directing customers to another shop less damaged:



Or what about this one posted outside one of the few guesthouses not overly damaged, although on the beach:



With lots of love  
Lotte

## January 11th, 2005

Gradually the newspapers abroad are scaling down their coverage of the Tsunami. Suppose that more than two weeks of headlines all over the world is far beyond average for an Asian disaster, and although the period probably has been prolonged till now only because so many westerners being victims too, it has at least put Sri Lanka on the map and send a lot of donations this direction. For people here, however, the disaster really only begins now, where they are left to battle their losses and fears on their own.

Yesterday, I for the first time since 25 December went to sit by the sea for more than a few minutes. I think we all still have this new and scary feeling of insecurity towards this mighty ocean and its unpredictable behaviour. It suddenly has got a new dimension, and it is as if the weather underlines this. Where January normally is dry and sunny, the sky this year is constantly cloudy and almost daily shedding rain drops. Thus, the sunset yesterday was wrapped up in clouds, which eventually turned crimson. It may have been my subdued fear, or it may really have looked liked it, but to me it seemed as if the sky was crying blood over the ocean, which too turned into an endlessly pool of blood. Sad and overwhelming.

At the same time, the beach may be more beautiful than ever. The same gang of local boys from Mambo's almost intact guesthouse, who cleared the roads, also cleaned the beach, and seen from the first floor of my old guesthouse Hansa Surf the bay totally resembled parts of a deserted island fringed by nothing but coconuts. Not a single sun bed, umbrella and marble coloured or lobster boiled fattish European tourist disturbed the picture.

But it is hard to cheat the mind and even harder to forget the fisherman I met a couple of days ago. With tears in his eyes and shivering hands he recounted how the police kicked him out of the primitive wooden house philanthropically villagers have build on his otherwise empty plot of land. "The police say that no one can reconstruct anything this close to the sea. The government has decided that we all have to live in flats inside the jungle. But how can I live many kilometres away from the ocean? How can I leave the land that my parents grew up on and move into a rented flat instead?" he repeated again and again. Knowing how much it takes an Asian to show any kind of emotions, and not least an Asian male, I realised that this may be THE disaster.

As usual in Asian politics, nothing is really clear, and I hear different distances mentioned all the time. But the sum of it all is that the Sri Lankan government now wants to make this so called "buffer zone" of 200 to 1000 meters from the sea, where no one supposedly are allowed to reconstruct what the Tsunami took.

Obviously, this is just seen as a double punishment for the people who are to be 'protected'. For once, there is no land available many kilometres inside this most heavily populated part of Sri Lanka, and as one of the top officials in Galle District told us, when I visited with the NGO Danish People's Aid, 'we need to build sky rise buildings further inside the island'. But - how do they imagine that people just give up the last thing they own: Land? Secondly, how do they imagine that people who have made their lives thanks to the sea, be it the fisherman or the hotel owner, are willing to give this entirely up? I am

sure that the flats are not going to be fitted with drying spaces for fishing nets plus free transport for the poor fishermen. And I wonder how the government will attract the tourists in the future if they cannot use the beaches anymore.

Taking into consideration that it is very unlikely that we will be hit by another Tsunami in the near future, it all seems a bit of an overreaction. It has, however, sparked yet another wave of panic, and everyone is now borrowing money here and there to be able to at least to set up some kind of ramshackle structure that may convince the government scouts that THEIR place certainly was not affected by the Tsunami. This may prevent the beach side land owners from ever getting a piece of the foreign support, but I suppose that their land along the ocean it worth a lot more than some support that they may, may not, get. Not the least emotionally and seen in a longer perspective.

This means that for example Ranjith and his brothers frantically have been cutting down trees in their gardens inland, as they have no money to buy rafters and uprights, and taking loans to buy tin sheets. They say they are going to open in another 10 days time to make pretend nothing ever happened, although they will have to keep all the food at home, as they have neither kitchen, fridges nor cooking utensils. When I asked about tables and chairs, they said they would find or borrow that somewhere. I am not even sure that the remaining two walls are that safe to reconstruct upon, but as Ranjith have no money yet to rebuild those walls, I suppose the few remaining customers (I and about five others...) will have to try to sit as far away from them as possible.

Same situation is to be found elsewhere. Saman from Top Secret has put up a small wooden bar at no time, and others are posting signs with 'open' on the road. I really, really wish that they may eventually fool the government officials, and personally I definitely will enjoy having a place or two to hang-out at soon again. For whatever reason this is being done, it will eventually bring some kind of normalcy back to Hikkaduwa.

For the same reason, I have to tell all of you huge thanks for the effort you are making in collecting and donating money. When I showed Ranjith my web-site and the bank account, he gave me a big and long lasting hug. And Manel just sent me a look so full of gratefulness, which I will never forget. Your money certainly is very much needed. As fast as possible, that is.

Still, I have postponed the final deadline for donations to be sent from Europe and elsewhere till Monday 24 January, as several people need more time to do their fundraising activities.

In the meantime, I personally have recovered a bit. I spent two days in Colombo last week, and after I returned, I have managed to write my first small article - including photos - for Danish People's Aid's and LO's websites. Not big art, but some kind of professional work, and I also have helped out a bit with the logistics. Danish People's Aid is going to set up office in Hikkaduwa and help a village or two getting back to a kind of life. A small, but manageable and visible help so very much needed.

With love  
Lotte

**January 6th, 2005**

Dear friends & family,

10 days have passed since the Tsunami ate big chunks of Asia and of life in the Hikkaduwa, I love so much. There have been few ups and many downs, and yet some things have become so very, very clear. Life somehow has got an entirely new perspective, and what and whom are important stand out more clearly than ever before.

For example: My old colleague Steen Ulrik from the Danish news agency Ritzaus Bureau came here to cover the disaster. As I for the first time in my life have been totally mentally blocked from writing and taking photos combined with an overwhelmingly bad conscience, I volunteered to do the logistics for him.

We saw dead bodies under the collapsed train just outside Hikkaduwa, and we drove through all the pulverized villages along the Southern coast, but only when we stopped at a private food distribution this surrealistic nightmare all of a sudden became only too real. It was a small truck parked in the outskirts of one of those many, many fishing villages, where nothing is left. A rowdy crowd of men basically fought their way through to the truck load, and the awfully scared volunteers ended up smacking the door in order to wait for the military to come. They did and forced people to sit down in a long row. I didn't cry till I got into our van.

The Southern part of Sri Lanka used to be a well functioning society, where no organisation has flagged their way through for years. Now these people, who always took care of themselves, are degraded to rice beggars. So humiliating. And I recalled that some people have told me that they would rather be dead than living in the Hikkaduwa to come, which I never understood till I saw what kind of life is waiting for those who are still alive. And it has just only begun.

Gradually, the official aid has started to seep through, and it was yet another chock to see a Save the Children flag wagging on another relief vehicle. Normally, that implies work for me, and that used to be far from here.

In many ways, the society here has degenerated. Yes, Sri Lanka also counts and did count amongst the third world countries, but at the same time the South of Sri Lanka had nothing in common with its poor neighbours Bangladesh or India. Sri Lanka is the richest country in South Asia - despite decades of war in the North and East - and everything has always been somewhat organised. People would not ride on the roof of the train or on the back of a truck. They would not stand waiting for whatever along the road or sleep outside as everyone had some kind of accommodation and job. We did not have too many beggars, child labourers and street kids, and Sri Lankans always made it a point of honour to be hospitable and proud of whatever little they had.

Somehow, that seems to vanish. The road sides are teeming with people waiting for the next truck with clothes, food, water, and among the surviving local vans and cars are loads of families travelling on trucks or fighting to get into any vehicle passing. The towing of smashed cars slows down the traffic along with all the rest, so it has become almost as tedious to travel as in Dhaka.

For me, however, the main revelation may be that it has become clearer than ever who are important to me, and who are just mere acquaintances. The fact that Ranjith and his brothers have lost their restaurant they ran throughout almost 30 years has given me permanent stomach ache. And when I for the first time saw my old friend and driver Manel's two remaining water damaged iron cutting machines standing all alone on their platform in the middle of rubble and ruins, I did not know what to say. To say that I'm sorry is a severe understatement.

Both families are typical middle class, but without income they may eventually slide down the slope very fast. The tourist season just started, and I am about the only foreigner left now. And how would they make money anyway without a restaurant, without a kitchen, without machines, without iron workshop, without... anything anyway?

Ranjith and his family and Manel are the people who are constantly on my mind these days, and subsequently I have decided to bypass those precious organisations that I have always been supporting and relying on. A couple of days ago I met my sister Trine, who is here to help on behalf of WHO, and we initiated our own fundraising for Ranjith and Manel, so they may reconstruct their restaurant and iron workshop. We have already got more than 10.000 Danish Kroner, but there is still a long way to go to reach the estimated 50.000 and 75.000 Kroner it will cost to get the workshop and the restaurant going again. And so many people depend on them: Family members, their staff, the people who used to provide them with raw materials, vegetables, fuel, food, maintainance.....  
So please everyone - help us.

In Denmark, you may transfer your donation to reg. no. 3627, account no. 3617354713 in Danske Bank.

Or if you live elsewhere, the money can be transferred to IBAN account no. DK6630003617354713 - swift address: DABADKDK.

Whatever amount - small or big - makes wonders in this situation, and I will of course keep you informed about what happens to the money.

As we would like to save fees, please do your transfer no later than Wednesday 12 January. I will make my bank in Denmark transfer the full amount to Sri Lanka about one week later, as I am aware that some of you outside Denmark may need some extra time to get the money through.

Furthermore, Torsten, my faithful web master in Copenhagen, is right now working on an update of my web-site [www.lotteladegaard.dk](http://www.lotteladegaard.dk), where you should be able to see photos of Manel's workshop and Ranjith's Beach Hut - or rather the remains - at some point today.

But there are also positive events. The last couple of days I ran away to Colombo and spent time with my friend Heshani. I was at the point where a 'BUH' would make me break down, and nobody would benefit from that. Basically, I needed a break after spending days cycling up and down the rubble tracing missing Danes for the embassy, shovelling rubble from the roadside along with the boys and giving interviews to journalists about the misery and the misery and the misery and...  
When I returned to Hikkaduwa today, I could not avoid noticing how fast things develop. More or less all roadsides are now cleared of broken walls, toilets, fridges, clothes and car wrecks, and people are working as maniacs everywhere to return things to normal.

Obviously, the ruins are still there, and entire villages have ceased to exist, while other places have got gaping wholes in the rows of houses, but the fact that four out of eight overthrown coaches are now standing on the railway tracks totally cleaned of dead bodies, and that the railway workers are already trying to reconstruct the railway line is overwhelmingly impressive.

I also saw whole families having lunch under their half roofs or on a pile of bricks, a very much need interruption during days of hard work. And in the most affected area just north of Hikkaduwa town, I saw wooden houses shoot up, probably by the help of Save the Children. At least they pledged to do

exactly that when I met their information officer and the local partner organisation in that area a few days back. It is not what it used to be, but it is housing and much better than nothing. A starting point.

Even Ranjith has managed to dispose of huge amounts of rubble, so the remaining two restaurant walls are standing naked on the beach side. A heart breaking view, but still a kind of progress.

Lotte

## **December 27th, 2004**

Dear friends,

As I you have heard, major parts of South and South East Asia have been hit by the strongest earth quake maybe ever and subsequently an extreme tidal wave has washed away shores of a series of countries. Sri Lanka being amongst the hardest hit means that I am very, very tired by now and even sadder. Furthermore, Hikkaduwa, where I live, has been without electricity and phone lines till about now. Only a couple of hours between two and four last night the mobile was suddenly working. That, however, stopped again. The whole day I have received worried messages, but have been unable to reply or call, and as the landlines have been totally down, I haven't been able to e-mail either. Thus this common mail - in English, so I only have to write once. Please bear with me.

About 7 o'clock yesterday morning I felt a minor earth quake. Not even hard enough for me to consider leaving my bed. Then, about 9.30 I suddenly heard lots of screams and voices outside. I wondered why and thought it was yet another railway crossing accident, which I definitely did not want to oversee. Then, I heard my friend Ranjith screaming and shouting "Lotte, Lotte, get out, get out, the water is coming - run to my brother's place on the hill - now".

I did try to go to the main road first, as I did not at all understand what it was all about. Loads of panicked people and a rush of water stopped me at the railway line, and as everyone was shouting that more water was due and people subsequently panicked and fled down my road I did as Ranjith ordered.

We had some very frustrating hours where nobody knew what happened, as phone lines and electricity were cut off, so we could not watch TV or listen to the radio and even less call someone outside town. Only did we receive one hurt and very shaken person after another, who could record how he or she was thrown on their surfboards over the rooftops or been washed out of their hotel rooms on the beach, and well, yes, it became clear that something was really, really wrong. A 10 meter tidal wave has basically washed Hikkaduwa away. My house is unscathed, but each and every building on the main road just few hundred meters away are if not totally damaged, then at least flooded and totally emptied of furniture and belongings, which are spread over huge area.

At a certain point I just could not wait any longer to know if my other friends were dead or alive, so I went out and found, well, yes, a landscape like after 20 years of civil war. Initially, it seemed as if everybody were all right, although severely chocked, but very, very happy to be alive. A crowd of the hard core party team from 'Top Secret' was sitting hopelessly drunk in the middle of the normally horribly busy Galle Road on shaky, broken chairs disgorged from the restaurants by the wave. A bit further South a group of young fishermen sat on their surprisingly connected catamarans - also in the middle of the road. It was all extremely unreal.

As hundreds of tourists suddenly were without accommodation, and there was no way out of here - the roads and railway line are gone, and there is no petrol to be found - they were stock. We all took a

group home. Even the poorest family. I had six people sleeping here. I never met them before, but I was so relieved not having to sleep alone. Especially when we finally had finished whatever alcohol I had in the house together with Ranjith, Dudley and the rest of the gang. Lying in bed everything suddenly became so obvious. No trains, no car horns, no music from the beach, no humming from the fridge. Only the sound of waves. We were all weary with sleeplessness in the morning - we had all been spending the entire night listening for the next big wave.

And my old friends Dudley and Ranjith? Ranjith's beach bar is gone. Only a couple of half walls remain. Dudley's shop was flooded, and we threw out about half of his stock today.

Today I also went along the beach, as the water has pulled back a bit again, and it was a shock to see gaping and empty hotel fronts. Suppose that about nine out of ten rooms are not inhabitable ever again.

Then, I walked all the way to and through Hikkaduwa town - about five kilometers - and that was real horror. Vans were bunched on top of each other, trucks were blown upside down several hundred meters into the jungle, and fishing boats were docked inside hotels or on the road. Cars were hanging in trees, and I regretted that I did not wear my trekking sandals, only flip-flops, to bring me over the mountains of bricks and broken glass. I could not recognize one, single shop. Either, they are totally gone, or they stand back as a scene from a war horror movie. There is no FedEx office any longer, there is no market, and there are only upside-down boats in the harbor. No pharmacy, not supermarket, no clinic, no bank, no nothing. People walked about with glossy, dead eyes, while the eventual tourist for once could not bring himself to take a photo. It is so, so horrible. Hikkaduwa is gone. Vanished from earth. As someone I met on the road said: "This will never become Hikkaduwa again. Maybe something else, but how?"

As the power came back a couple of hours ago - for once I am impressed with Sri Lankan authorities' speed and I wonder how they did it, as I have seen all the broken pylons and wires hanging here and there - we finally could watch the news on TV. One train was thrown off the tracks just outside Hikkaduwa, and hundred of dead bodies are floating here and there.

On the beach, people found two foreign kids and a young girl, who were taken to the hospital, where people flock to identify their mothers, fathers or children. Malaka, an acquaintance of mine has not seen his mother and grand father since yesterday. Only his dad - dead. Raja, whom he works with, and a close friend of mine, was in his van in town, when the wave hit. He was thrown several meters through the air and landed on the roof, while the water turned the cabin into an aquarium. His leg was stuck, and he told me he was sure he would die. Miraculously, he got out, just to find two small Sri Lankan girls drowned. He looks 10 years older, and that is not only due to his limp.

Rumors continue to go that we are to receive another tidal wave, but it is not so important any longer. It simply can't become worse. The main worry is now: How to survive here? Most of the tourists managed to get on some kind of vehicle to take them for hours through small village roads to the airport, and well, will they ever return? People here just invested heavily in their businesses as all prognoses said this to become THE tourist season after many years of troublesome war in the North and East. That means old bank loans to pay back, while having to invest in reconstruction. Without income for the rest of the tourist season plus the rainy season. It simply is not possible. People are going to suffer so extremely much, and that may be the most painful part of the whole story.

You all know I love this place more than anything else. It is like losing a part of the body, and I am afraid that Dudley's wife Padmini was hitting the spot when she concluded tonight: "We will have to start all over again - at the same stage as 50 years ago".

I have gotten several requests for articles for Danish media, and my friends here have begged me to take photos and write, so that someone will help them. I did do a small interview with Berlingske tonight, and I may do one with Politiken too. But - for the first time in my life I feel unable to do what I know I ought to do to help those I love and care for. Putting words and pictures on what happens here is like exhibiting a dying child. It is very, very painful.

Lotte