



SOLIHULL

Dear friends,

Of the many miles we as a family have been fortunate to travel over the years, none have left a more significant and lasting impression than our recent travels in Sri Lanka.

In particular, seeing firsthand the various ways in which Assist RR is alleviating the darkness of war will live long in our memories and steel our resolve to continue supporting its wonderful charity work, wherever possible in the future.

A whole lot of extraordinary work has already taken place and, alas, there is still a whole lot more to be done.

Accompanied by Dr Velautham Sarveswaran, Henry Amalraj and Veluppillai Sivakumar from the charity, our journey north began on July 15th and was punctuated by a series of visits to past, present and future projects funded most generously by supporters of Assist RR.

Please, allow me to be categorical – without this support, thousands of men, women and children would be a lot worse off than they are now and very many would remain trapped indefinitely in a cycle of poverty and destitution.

Over the following few days we were delighted to see the rebuilt classrooms that Solihull School had previously help fund in Mullivaikkal West and Veenavil in Mullaitivu – not least because as educators we passionately believe in the transformative power of education; a view, I know, that is shared by the Tamil community worldwide.



We were also very privileged to be present for one of the many cataract surgery clinics funded by Solihull School families. On July 17th, 100 patients were given the gift of sight through the laudable and combined efforts of Assist RR and Vision 2020.

We had the pleasure of watching Dr Dias Jayasiri, perform life changing surgery on patients who would never otherwise have the means to correct their vision – without which they would have to endure an irreversible decline in their quality of life. Dr Jayasiri deserves the highest praise for his selfless and tireless efforts. So too does Dr Asela Abeydeera, of Vision 2020 for all the work he and his team do in organising these camps.



The clinic was remarkably well organised and after speaking with so many of the patients, it was even more clear to us as visitors that the work done in these camps is of critical importance to people's livelihoods. Each and every patient we spoke to had their own reasons why their sight was so important to them; so to know that so many adults, and their families, would wake up very happy the next day was a delight to see and testament to the efforts of all involved.

We also visited the hospital in Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK) and met the inspirational, Dr Sathiyaruban. He and his wife are doing an incredible job of making the most of the huge support Assist RR have given to their hospital. We visited the newly opened and well stocked Intensive Care Unit, the beautiful new children's ward, the stunning new male ward, the newly built shaded waiting area and discussed development plans for a hospital that caters for a very large population, which relies very heavily on its services.



We visited the Roman Catholic School in PTK that benefitted from significant support from Assist RR in 2014, after the majority of its buildings were decimated during the war. Much progress has been made but they still have to make regular use of an outdoor space that is structurally unsound, ill-equipped for learning and offers precious little protection against the elements.



We also spent a joyful morning with the staff and children of Sivapatha Kalaiyagam School, Kilinochchi. Here we were present for the opening of the water tower (funded by Rotary Club of The Ponds, District 9685, Australia); we visited the toilet blocks, (funded by Anbalayam, Australia and E80 Peradeniya Tamil Engineers) for use by its 450 pupils and teachers; we watched a demonstration football match played in jerseys donated by Solihull School through Assist RR; and spoke with the children about the importance of their effort and mindset in education.



We ventured further north still to Jaffna and met a number of regional and district officials including Mr N Vethanayagan, GA of Jaffna, to discuss projects, presented bicycles funded by Assist RR to children who commute long distances to further their education and - just in case I give the impression that it was all work and no play... we ate fried fish and drank toddy at Sarves's home in Karaveddy. There was so much we saw and so much we discussed, that I could never fully do it justice here.



The joy and optimism of seeing, in person, what is possible when people pause long enough to care and then donate, was tempered only by seeing the sobering reality of what still needs to be done.

Many thousands of adults will succumb to irreversible blindness in one or both eyes, losing the ability to earn a living and live independently in the process, if their cataracts are not removed in time. The RC School in PTK is still using a structurally unsound makeshift shelter for many lessons. The children in every school we visited need access to the internet to help further their education. They also need books. And desks. Many more children need bikes to commute to school.

We visited Uyarappulam village in Anaikkoddai, Jaffna, where 170 displaced families live, cut off from Jaffna by very poor infrastructure and a housing settlement in Mullivaikkal East, just a few hundred metres back from the main road.



In both these villages, we witnessed a level of poverty and destitution we hadn't seen since our time in Africa almost 20 years ago.

So my reason for writing to you is two fold. Firstly, to commend you for the support I know very many of you have offered in the past. It is making a very real difference to the lives of very many men, women and children who are incredibly grateful for all that you have done to support them. Secondly, to encourage you discuss with your loved ones what financial support you could give now.

It may be that you and/or your children initiate fundraising at your child's school, sports club or community centre. It may be that you sell unused belongings on Ebay and donate the profits or it could be that your work colleagues prove to be very supportive and generous when you explain the needs to them and organise a fundraising activity. Or perhaps you could look at what you could personally donate.

Whatever means you may choose, I can assure you that your support would be hugely appreciated and put to very good use for the benefit of people who have so very little.

Assist RR is a wonderful charity. What's more, in 23 years of dealing with charities throughout my school career, I have never know one to get as much value for money out of its donations as they do.

The work Assist RR continues to do and the warmth and hospitality extended to us by the Sri Lankan people during our visit was way beyond our expectations – and we could not be more inspired or grateful for having had the opportunity to experience both.

Kindest regards,

Mark Penney

Head of Solihull Junior School