



WINTER STORY

By Gillian Southey, CWS communications coordinator.

Vasanta has grown a good crop of rice thanks to new gardening techniques she learnt from Devasarana.



THE LONG ROAD HOME

After five years locked in a camp for displaced people, Vasanta is glad to be home. Displaced by war, she came home to find her house and land in ruins. Now a widow like many in the tiny community in Sri Lanka's Mannar District, she has harvested her first crops of paddy rice.

Behind her beautiful smile is an immense well of sadness and loss. Once well-off, the mother of three lost her husband in the war and has taken in her brother's two children. Her brother is one of many people missing six years after the conflict ended.

Vasanta is determined to bring life back to her land. She has planted rice and coconuts. With the tractor that belonged to her husband, she ploughed the land. The bitter legacy of the 26 year war has left its mark on her community.

THE LONG SHADOW OF WAR

The bitter conflict and widespread war crimes have scarred the land and the lives of its people. In May 2009 government forces defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam fighting for a separate Tamil homeland. More than 100,000 people were killed in the fighting and a million more fled their homes. Landmines mark some areas and most fields are overgrown. Many have faced discrimination and were interred in poorly served refugee camps. The government has yet to return land it has occupied since the war, the military presence in the north and east where the fighting occurred is very high, and thousands of Tamils are waiting to be resettled. Returning home with often limited assistance, families struggle to survive and deal with the memories of what they have seen.

They worry about family and friends missing since the war ended. According to a 2012 United Nations report,



Returning from government camps, the community constructed temporary shelters from homes destroyed in the war. Vasanta (pictured) spells out the community's plans to rebuild homes and livelihoods.



they number 70,000 but others say many more. Some are in custody while others have been killed. Families like Vasanta's are hoping the government's promise to bring outstanding cases to trial will help them find out what has happened to those who have disappeared and resolve the uncertainty.

The United Nations is insisting on a fair investigation into the war crimes and human rights violations that occurred during the war but so far the Sri Lankan government has managed to stall the process. Without such an investigation, the human rights of Tamils and other minorities remain under question.



All photos: CWS/T Murray

With aid money from the Indian government, the community are building new homes.

A PEACE AGENDA

Since the war's end political forces have inflamed differences between Tamil and the majority Sinhala peoples. Some local groups have held on to a strong peace agenda no matter what happened. The Devasarana Development Centre is one Christian World Service partner who has countered the racism that has been common for decades. Based in rural Kurunegala, the Centre has fostered interreligious dialogue and interethnic understanding. In more recent years it has trained small farmers in ecological practices to improve the land and their livelihoods.

When Vasanta and others returned to their land in war ravaged Mannar, a group went north from Devasarana armed with seeds, bees, plants and farming skills. Usually suspicious of Sinhala groups from outside, they were welcomed. With their help and training, the displaced people have established new gardens using compost and organic fertilisers. Home gardens have filled a food gap and beekeeping units have improved pollination rates as well as provided honey to eat and for sale. In a country battered by four major floods and three major droughts in the last five years on top of the war, the new techniques and friendship of Devasarana have been life-giving. ■

EDUCATION FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

One thing that war cannot take away is an education. For young Syrian refugees, it has become a high priority. Afraid of the increasing violence, Nowar and her family fled Damascus in 2013. Her father had died because he could not get medical treatment he needed. Shortly after they left the family heard their home was destroyed by a bomb.

Palestinian refugees, they became double refugees when they arrived in Lebanon to live with her Aunt close to the Saida Centre run by the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees. As soon as she heard about DSPR's education programme Nowar enrolled. In nine months she was able to catch up one of the two years schooling she missed. Last year she returned home with a group of students to sit her final baccalaureate exam under the supervision of DSPR Lebanon. When asked if she was afraid to return to Syria, she stated, "No! I was too excited to take my exam!"

She passed her exam and can apply to universities if scholarships become available. She said, "It was like a dream to have this opportunity. When I left Syria, I thought I would never be able to continue my education. I was so surprised to be given the chance."

DSPR runs education programmes in Lebanon and Jordan along with medical days, life skills programmes. It provides food and non-food assistance as well as psychosocial care.

NEW ZEALANDERS ASSIST REFUGEES

In June 73 concerned people took on the Operation Refugee challenge to raise funds for Syrian refugees. So far their efforts have raised around \$30,000. One participant Sonia Groes-Petrie says, "It is good to be able to do something positive for the people of Syria. The scale is so overwhelming and I so admire the work DSPR is doing."

Thanks for your lifegiving gifts to refugees. Please support the Winter Appeal so CWS partners can give practical help to refugees returning home.



YES, I WOULD LIKE TO SUPPORT REFUGEES .

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Reference: Your CWS Supporter ID no.

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Name on credit card _____

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Christian World Service

National Office

PO Box 22652, Christchurch 8140. Ph: 03 366 9274 0800 74 73 72
cws@cws.org.nz www.cws.org.nz

Auckland office: (09) 5719150

CWS is a registered charity: #CC22288

