

# merlin RESPONSE

providing healthcare in crises

summer 2001

## 10,000 TRAPPED ON RIVER ISLANDS



**"Merlin, the British charity, is the only humanitarian group still helping Pjang refugees" - Sunday Times, 1 April 2001**

By Paul Handley — Merlin, Tajikistan

Over 10,000 refugees are stranded on two islands in the River Pjang on the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. They are not allowed to cross to Tajikistan nor can they go back whilst the fighting continues around their towns and villages.

Refugees are a common enough phenomenon, but the situation for

### Dear Friends

**Response** is back. Thanks to our sponsors, it is now more colourful and cheaper to produce.

Merlin is still small but works in 11 countries. We respond to health crises as quickly as we can, but we also find it most useful to remain in a country for as long as we are needed, assisting the local people in finding their own strength to deal with health needs.

We greatly appreciate all the efforts from the many people who work with Merlin around the world (did you know that we have employees of 60 nationalities?). We are also very grateful to all the people and organisations that fund our projects and support our cause.

The world is becoming very small and Merlin is helping to make it healthier.

Enjoy the newsletter and keep in touch!

these people is unusual. They left their homes in Northern Afghanistan in September 2000 as fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance forces intensified. But they were not just running away from the fighting. The whole region has been struck by the worst droughts in decades.

The Tajik government has come under international pressure to allow refugees to cross. However, the recent war in Tajikistan has left them unable to cope even with the needs of the Tajik people. The government is concerned that if they allow this group to enter, it will lead to a mass influx of thousands more.

It is hard to think of another situation in the world where people are so isolated from the two countries between which they are living.

Merlin first visited the islands in November 2000 and access has not been easy. A major concern is that the people have virtually no access to healthcare, and only one qualified doctor and a health

worker are available. The people spread over 25km on the largest island are entirely dependent on Merlin's clinics.

Merlin's activities on the islands include rapid health assessments, distribution of medications, a mobile clinic and measles vaccination campaigns, with a steady stream of mothers and fathers bringing children along to Merlin's temporary vaccination point.

At the end of a recent visit, the elders and community leaders came to say farewell. Suddenly there was panic everywhere, people running in all directions.



**The survival of these refugees is entirely dependent on aid coming via Tajikistan**

### TAJIKISTAN FACT FILE

- Merlin provides drugs to 81 health centres
- Merlin equips laboratories & trains health professionals
- Merlin carries out Public Health Promotion work
- Merlin maintains an emergency response capacity

A stray spark from a cooking fire quickly destroyed a shelter, serving to reinforce the position of vulnerability that these people are in.

The refugees simply want to return to their homes following a resolution of the conflict one way or the other. In the meantime the political stalemate over their future continues.

### MBE for Valerie Powell



Valerie Powell has been awarded the MBE in recognition of her continuing devotion to humanitarian aid through Merlin. She is praised as the first female aid worker to reach the epicentre of an earthquake in Afghanistan in 1997, which killed over 4,000 people. Her latest venture is with Merlin in Tajikistan as a health worker.

This edition of Response was sponsored by News International and The Economist



## TUBERCULOSIS IN TOMSK

For six months of the year, the forest and marshlands of Tomsk in Western Siberia lie under a thick blanket of snow. In this frozen wilderness, a highly infectious strain of multi-drug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) is now prevalent.

For the last six years, Merlin's programme in Tomsk has responded to the evolution of multi-drug resistant types of TB. The Merlin treatment system was based on a WHO concept known as DOTS (Directly Observed Treatment System) and is a simple method of treating TB cases.

If these drugs are not taken daily over nine months, they are ineffective. Unfortunately, adverse conditions in Russia such as severe poverty (more than 30 per cent of the population are unemployed), alcohol abuse and malnutrition have frequently affected treatment. Immunity has consequently plummeted and infection has triumphed.

The necessity of a rapid response to the evolving MDR-TB is evident. Merlin has oriented its programme towards improving diagnosis and treatment of the new strains.

Professor Tim Cullinan, Merlin's Health Advisor, adds; "TB epidemics can easily be defined as emergencies, because they are so devastating".

Merlin, the only NGO in an area incorporating a total population of 1 million people, operates an early diagnosis programme.

A major drawback is the time taken to treat the disease—on average, 4 months. In addition, each case of MDR-TB costs in excess of US\$ 6,000 to treat and there are roughly 400 cases in Tomsk. The WHO has managed to negotiate a reduction in price with the drug suppliers to US\$ 1,200, yet this is still not cheap.

A major tenet of Merlin's rationale is in capacity building; providing education in health care and nutrition, training nurses, increasing the social support for outpatients and in disseminating localised experiences across Russia. Merlin hopes that by providing these services soon the areas will become self-sufficient.

### The problem of HIV/AIDS

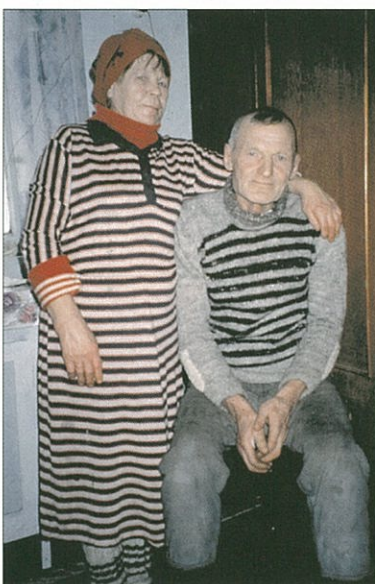
The rapid spread of HIV/AIDS is having a serious effect on people's susceptibility to TB. Many people carry the disease yet the symptoms are suppressed. Then if AIDS attacks the immune system, the TB manifests itself.

Dr Vadim Pokrovsky, Director of Russia's federal centre for AIDS agrees. "The HIV epidemic is a tragedy in itself. But far worse will be the eventual depopulation of the country. Not only will those with AIDS die,

but they will not have children," he states.

Both diseases know no borders. Is it only a matter of time before they converge in Tomsk?

"...PIONEERING..."



Is it only a matter of time?

## MOSQUITOS AND BED-NETS IN KENYA

Merlin has returned to Kisii and Gucha districts in Kenya, where its new project will focus on malaria control and health service capacity building. Kisii and Gucha districts are in one of the poorest and most densely populated provinces in Kenya.

The new funding, from the Finnish government and Jersey Overseas Agency, will see a continuation of a previous Merlin project where approximately 60,000 houses were sprayed and a self-sustainable "bed-net market" established. 50 commu-

nity groups (one known as the Moonas), reaching a total of 1.5 million people, distributed 10 per cent of the bed-nets for free, sold the remaining number and used the profit to buy more nets.

The project will also involve training Ministry of Health staff in data collection and general management. Research, data collection and analysis is to be carried out in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

## STOP PRESS GUINEA

Up to 150,000 people are fleeing conflict in Guinea. Previously accommodated in camps along the border with Liberia and Sierra Leone, the area is now so unstable and unsafe for the delivery of aid, that the UN and Guinean authorities have acted, relocating refugee camps to areas away from the conflict zone.



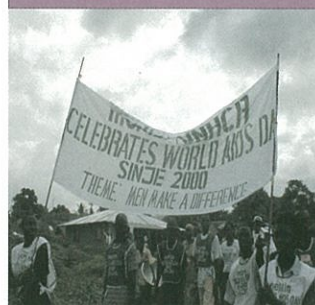
Residual spraying in action

Malaria is the principle cause of morbidity in Guinea and this

moving population is at risk from the disease. 50 per cent of hospital deaths of under fives are due to malaria.

Merlin's logistical and medical staff started work in May. In close collaboration with the WHO, they are providing a comprehensive programme of residual spraying and co-ordinating a local spray team and community awareness workers.

## WORLD AIDS DAY IN SINJE REFUGEE CAMP

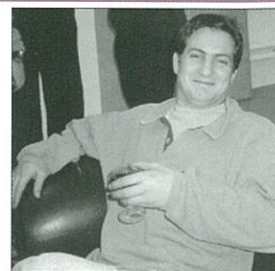


On December 2nd, 2000, Merlin celebrated World AIDS day. Unusually, it did so in Sinje, a camp in Liberia hosting over 17,000 refugees.

The celebration included a parade of Merlin staff, refugee health worker trainees and members of the community, mostly local youth.

Merlin staff also took part in a football tournament and won!

## Nick Abrahams "From the desk to the field"



Until May 2001, Nick, 27, was an operations assistant in Merlin's London HQ, responsible for providing management support to our East and Central Africa programmes. Then, he was posted to the field. Here are his thoughts before leaving for the field and four weeks into his experience.

### BEFORE

#### How did you start at Merlin?

I accepted a post in logistics, after volunteering in Merlin's Development department. The attraction of Merlin was the close working relationships between staff and departments.

#### Where are you off to?

I will be spending six months in Kasai Oriental—an area of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

#### And what will your job entail?

Logistics, administration, and organising the supply of medicines. Our project's aim is to set up 20 health centres and one hospital, improve the water catchment system, and train doctors and nurses.

#### What will you miss the most?

Beer...Kasai is 'dry'... and my friends and family, of course!

### AFTER

#### What's the DRC like?

Extremely hot and humid. A few times I've woken up in the night, but usually I get woken up by cockerels at 6:00AM. Then there's the nightly ritual of chasing chickens out of the compound at the end of each day...

#### Has the experience changed you?

We visited the Catholic monastery, and I found myself asking the senior brother where he got his curtain material from! I've also had to put another hole in my belt, although this is partly due to my bulging wallet, a vhf radio and my pen-knife – invaluable for opening bottles of warm beer.

#### What have you done so far?

We have secured the compound with a large bamboo fence, built a fuel depot and motorbike store and painted the office amid visits to health centres. The HF radio has been installed and cheers resounded

around the office when we made our first contact with Kindu (the other project site, a one hour plane ride).

Since then I've been planning medical training sessions. I'm off now to rehabilitate our local water source so we don't have to collect drinking water from the other side of town!

Good luck Nick!

"...OF GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE..."



## MALARIA IN EAST TIMOR

By Lisa Keoh

80% of all malaria cases occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, yet other parts of the world are also affected. Southern East Timor is highly malarious with epidemics of the disease linked to seasonal patterns.

In these hazardous areas, Merlin responds to outbreaks and assists local

**"...A PARTNER & CO-ORDINATOR..."**

health authorities, often through targeted spraying, especially during the rainy season.

In collaboration with the World Health

Organisation, Merlin runs education programmes in 13 districts, which include training people to use bed-nets.

## STABILITY IN AN UNSTABLE ALBANIA

By Simon Clements & Lucy Heaven

Merlin is rebuilding Albania's six regional public health laboratories. The public health system lacked investment for decades and was put under pressure by the collapse of communism, financial disaster and an influx of refugees.

Merlin provides equipment for the laboratories and trains staff to diagnose infectious diseases. Merlin also aims to improve the data supplied to the national surveillance system at the Institute of Public Health in Tirana, so that infectious diseases and environmental hazards can be monitored and out-

breaks detected early. Hospital laboratories in Gjirokastra, Permet, Tepelene and Sarande have been rebuilt, and the nationwide training programme has been carried out to ensure proper use of laboratory equipment. This will hopefully lead to local communities having greater confidence in the system.

Merlin is now proposing a new nine-month initiative to improve the condition of the laboratories, which are responsible for food, water and environmental safety for the general population. The work being carried out by Merlin and other organisations is crucial to restoring the nation's health.

## LASSA FEVER IN SIERRA LEONE

In a hospital in Sierra Leone, a country ravaged by war for over 10 years, Merlin runs Africa's only specialised unit for the treatment of Lassa fever.

Merlin joined the unit, which treats 50 cases per month, in 1996 and provides treatment, supplies medical equipment and drugs, and community education. The unit is led by Dr Conteh, who has worked with Lassa fever for over 20 years and, in May 2000, recovered from the disease after contracting it from a patient.

Lassa fever is a highly contagious viral disease spread by rats either through direct contact or contaminated food and water. Symptoms include high fever and widespread bleeding. If an epidemic strikes, one in three people who contract the disease will die if not treated.

Ongoing research is carried out by feeding data back to medical schools. Merlin supports the Ministry of Health's Lassa Task Force, training doctors and nurses. "Mass migration is combined with overcrowding, poor levels of sanitation and hygiene. This increases the risk of transmission," says Nicholas Cadge, Merlin's medical co-ordinator.



**Treated by Merlin**

"The crucial role of Merlin is in putting services on the ground for Lassa fever," explains Bill Aldis, World Health Organisation in Sierra Leone. "There is no more enthusiastic advocate for Merlin's work than me."

## EARTHQUAKE HITS GUJARAT, INDIA

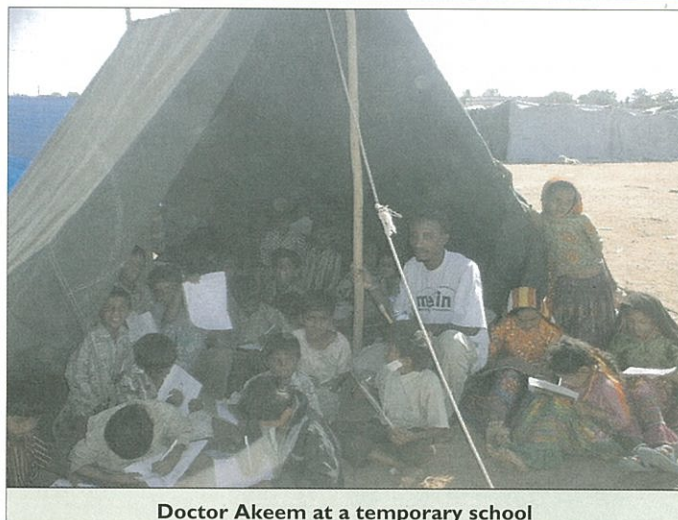
An earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale hit Gujarat state in Western India on Friday 26 January 2001, affecting over 15 million people. Merlin responded to the disaster by rebuilding the shattered healthcare infrastructure, and providing hygiene promotion activities.

**Dr Cathy Brooker reports from Gujarat**

Just about everyone I speak to has a story to tell. Perhaps the most devastating was when I chatted to a midwife in Dhamadka. She had nine pregnant women in her village - four died in the quake.

It is now many months since the earthquake and the city of Bhuj is getting back on its feet. Each day businesses are opening and more goods and services become available (the Merlin team even have a toaster now!).

The town is still very hot, dry and dusty, and there is hardly a building



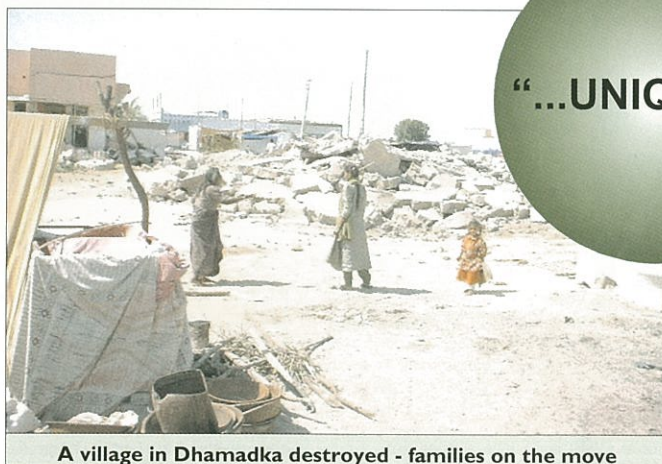
**Doctor Akeem at a temporary school**

unaffected. The people we chat to want to help in the relief effort. They are religious and discuss how easily God can take away and how there

is no place for complacency in life. They all seem very appreciative of the international attention to their plight. We're surrounded by local staff, who are putting in plenty of extra hours, and lots of pleasant neighbours.

A woman behind us asks me over the fence why no-one ever sleeps here. Maybe we need to be a bit quieter!

**"...UNIQUE..."**



**A village in Dhamadka destroyed - families on the move**

## UPDATE ON INDIA

The Merlin team is now well into the construction phase of the programme. The last week of May saw the completion of the Bhuj central health administrative centre.

A six-strong team of health workers has also been running regular hygiene promotion campaigns with schools, community gatherings and women's groups.

## PENNY GUINNESS IN THE FIELD

Penny Guinness, a Human Resources Officer at Merlin's HQ, has just returned from a week in Sierra Leone.

Keen to meet Merlin national staff and to see the programme in action, she took part in a whistle-stop tour of Merlin's medical activities in Kenema. She was struck by the calm atmosphere and the well-organised structure of the Internally Displaced Peoples' camp which houses around 20,000 and functions as a 'halfway house' to shelter the homeless. To encourage a sense of belonging within the community,



each family helps in the construction of their own 'booth'. Penny also found that the camp's amenities are so over-used that an alternative site for the camp may eventually have to be found. Impressed by the committed and efficient staff, she said it was great to see the results of all the hard work that has been put in over the last few years. Her sentiments were similar after a brief tour of Kenema Government Hospital where she visited the therapeutic feeding centre, paediatric ward, under 5's clinic and Lassa fever ward (although she declined a tour of the inside of the latter!).



# FAMILIAR FACES & WACKY RACES

## VINCENT DIAMOND REMEMBERED



Merlin pays tribute to Vincent Diamond, who was tragically taken from us in a climbing accident in the Elbrus mountains on 10th February 2000.

Vincent, above right with Tim Healing, Merlin's Health Advisor, was Merlin's Emergency Pool Co-ordinator and helped organise our logistical operations. Tim said; "Vincent was a dynamic, enthusiastic and likeable person who made an enormous contribution to Merlin. We miss him a great deal." Merlin was honoured to send a representative to Vincent's memorial service in February 2001.

We are very grateful to Vincent's family and former school who kindly chose to mark Vincent's service to Merlin by supporting fundraising efforts for our cause. Particular thanks goes to the 6<sup>th</sup> Form (year 2000) of Monk's Walk School who raised £832.26 through a sponsored pram push.



### GOLDEN SUPPORT FOR MERLIN

Stephanie Cook, medical graduate, and Gold Medallist in the Modern Pentathlon at the Sydney Olympics, has pledged her support to Merlin. She hopes in the future to work for Merlin in the field.

## LONDON MARATHON 2001 - RUNNING FOR MERLIN

"...one of the best days of my life - I will never forget this day." Sebastien Bourgoin—JMC Airlines



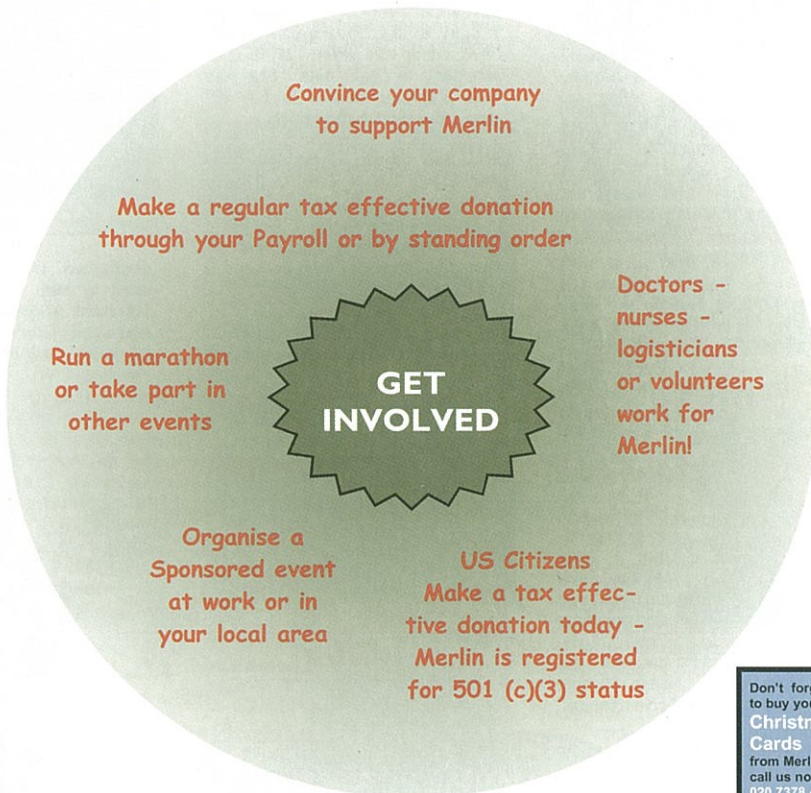
At the time of going to print, Merlin's 2001 London Marathon Runners look set to raise a staggering £40,000 for Merlin.

David Bill and Milla Shah organised 'The Centipede' - a team of MBA students from Cranfield University, whilst Richard Bird and Tim Bull co-ordinated a team of runners from JMC Airlines. Other runners included present and former members of staff. Thanks also go to the Ship and Shovel Inn, Craven Passage, for their kind hospitality at the end of a very long day.

"We felt we were giving something back." David Bill—Cranfield MBA team

The runners: Bruce Axten—Will Banks—Richard Bird—Sebastien Bourgoin—Fraser Dean—Terence Dillon—David Falconi—Louise Formby—Rob Fuller—Sue Fursey—Mark Hodgkinson—Amy Kam—Eike Knolle—Jack Lavender—Sally Lavender—Simon Lloyd—James Mceuen—Leslie Mansell—Louise Moriarty—Richard Norris—Jane Ritchie—Ciaran Ryan—Nigel Schol—Jonathan Swai

## HOW YOU CAN HELP MERLIN



Don't forget to buy your Christmas Cards from Merlin - call us now on 020 7378 4845 to reserve your packs

### The Merlin 'Sorcerers' Ball

23 November 2001  
Merchant Taylor's Hall



Tickets include champagne on arrival, dinner with wine, auction, casino and more

£85 per person

Book your tickets by calling

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To make a donation, learn more about Merlin, or volunteer, call Nigel on

**020 7378 4845**

or visit Merlin's web site at [www.merlin.org.uk](http://www.merlin.org.uk)