

Summer 2007

The newsletter for Merlin supporters

RESPONSE

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**Thousands of
tsunami survivors
flee fighting**





From our Chief Executive

While campaigners worldwide gathered on April 29 on the fourth anniversary of the Darfur conflict, calling for greater intervention to end the violence and suffering, Merlin's teams on the ground there were working tirelessly to scale up operations.

In recent months, our work had been restricted due to increasing security concerns, but we are now gearing up to full capacity to provide medical care for thousands of people. It is clear that more people than ever need our help now, and we will strive to reach as many of them as possible.

Meanwhile, the escalating conflict in eastern Sri Lanka has been a serious concern. As you will read here, many families who were starting to rebuild their lives after the devastating tsunami two years ago have now been forced to flee their homes because of intense fighting. In addition to rebuilding hospitals and training staff in tsunami-affected areas, Merlin has been able to respond to the health needs of around 20,000 displaced people in camps.

In other countries, Merlin works to combat some of the world's worst health statistics. I recently visited Ethiopia, where we are providing clean water and health care to reduce the shocking number of deaths from water-borne diseases. You can also read about a health assessment we conducted in Sierra Leone, where one in six women dies in childbirth – the highest maternal death rate in the world.

None of this work would have been possible without your vital support. Thank you for your continued generosity.

Carolyn Miller

Carolyn Miller Chief Executive

► Thousands of tsunami survivors flee intense fighting

The Saraswathy family's home in eastern Sri Lanka was destroyed first by the tsunami and then again by a recent military offensive. Jacqueline Koch tells their story:

The heavy bursts of shelling we could hear from Batticaloa told us that the campaign against Tamil separatists had intensified. We knew all too well what the result would be: thousands more refugees seeking safety in camps.

Over the weekend, around 40,000 people arrived, joining the 80,000 who had fled their homes in the last six months.

I travelled with Merlin's health team to Mahamagam camp, to which around 500 people had fled. Exhausted children stood patiently with their parents by the camp office, waiting to be assigned a place to sleep. With the tents lined up in tight rows, it was obvious that space was becoming scarce.

Graphic reminders of the conflict were everywhere: a man who had lost his foot to a mine; an older woman whose hands shook violently from the lasting damage of a shell attack; and a four-year-old boy with ugly shrapnel wounds on his back and thigh.

Along the road to the camp, I could see more new arrivals walking in the punishing heat and carrying what little they could salvage from their homes.

This is where I met the Saraswathy family. Tharapan, a mother of four, invited me into her tent and told me how they had lost their home twice in the past two years. The first occasion was in December 2004 when it was swept away by the tsunami.

"We rebuilt our house with our own money," says Tharapan. "It wasn't a shack; we had a stone house with a marble floor."

In December last year, their new house was hit by a shell during a military offensive.

"Everything we'd worked for had been destroyed," Tharapan explains. "A lot of people were killed and we left at night in the rain. We didn't take any of our possessions, only the clothes we were wearing. To get away from the fighting, we had to cross a lagoon, which was two kilometres wide. The water came up to our necks. I was



Mahamagam, one of the camps for displaced people in Batticaloa where Merlin is working.



Tsunami survivor Tharapan with her daughter, Tharamija, who was treated by Merlin's medical team.

"Everything we'd worked for had been destroyed..."

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covered with mud from head to foot. It was three in the morning by the time we got to the other side. The children were shivering with cold."

Painfully, Tharapan describes how others did not survive the crossing. "Several children drowned and I watched as their parents had to abandon them without a proper burial. They covered them with leaves at the bottom of a tree."

Having survived the tsunami, the violence of war, and a perilous journey to safety, the Saraswathys now needed help for their daughter, Tharamija. She was suffering from diarrhoea and dehydration.

"It's children like her that I worry about the most," says Kolitha Wickramage, Merlin's Community Health Development Co-ordinator. "They are so vulnerable."

After examining Tharamija, he arranges for a course of rehydration salts and makes sure that her mother is able to feed her adequately. "Her condition is not too serious," says Kolitha. "With these simple measures she'll be okay in a couple of days."

At camps across this district of eastern Sri Lanka, Merlin is helping thousands of families like the Saraswathys. So far we have helped to prevent any major outbreaks of disease. But as the number of displaced people continues to rise, we are stepping up our operations to ensure that diseases like hepatitis and diarrhoea do not escalate out of control.



Around 120,000 people displaced by fighting in the north are living in camps in Batticaloa district.

Merlin is providing medical aid to around 20,000 people in camps in Batticaloa.





Patients queue up to register at a medical camp in Pyuthan.

► Medical camps reach isolated communities in Nepal

Years of conflict and economic ruin in Nepal have resulted in a virtually collapsed health system, leaving half of the population without access to adequate health care. Many health facilities struggle to cope with a drastic shortage of trained staff, medicines and equipment.

Mothers and children in particular have suffered as a result of not receiving basic health care. According to a government report, one in five women gives birth without trained medical assistance. Maternal death rates in Nepal are among the highest in the world, and more than 50 per cent of young children suffer from malnutrition.

Merlin has been working in the isolated Pyuthan district in the heartland of the Maoist insurrection. In order to reach some of the most remote communities, four mobile medical camps have been set up, each lasting between eight to seventeen days. These camps enabled medical teams to reach more than 9,000 people who would otherwise have no access to health care.

Serious gynaecological cases were referred to hospital for surgery, including more than 100 patients with uterine prolapse, a condition in which the womb becomes weakened after childbirth. Without surgery, sufferers can endure a lifetime of discomfort.

Merlin Health Advisor Dr Fayaz Ahmad met a patient who had suffered from uterine prolapse for 14 years and had never sought medical treatment because she thought it was a common occurrence after childbirth. Pabithra, a mother of five, developed the condition after the birth of her third child.

"She said she had learnt to live with the discomfort, but that it had prevented her from carrying out some physical activities, such as carrying water from the spring to her home," explains Dr Ahmad. "With Merlin's support, Pabithra and other sufferers will now be able to receive the surgical treatment they need."

► Returning to Darfur's no-go zone

Merlin is scaling up its operation in Darfur in response to increasingly desperate health needs. The move follows a period of several months in which escalating violence had forced aid agencies to suspend many vital projects helping displaced people.

Two million people have lost their homes during the violent four-year conflict in this region of Sudan. Most are now living in makeshift camps with little or no access to health care.

Merlin is one of the few agencies providing health care in the south of the region. From its base in the town of Nyala, medical teams reach out to more than 400,000 people through a network of permanent clinics at sites such as Sanyafundu, Seleah and Hijer. Mobile clinics travel out to more remote camps where people face malnutrition and are at high risk from diseases such as diarrhoea, malaria, meningitis and pneumonia.

In December, Merlin was forced to temporarily suspend much of its operations as it was unable to guard against increasing threats to the safety of its staff. However, in April, after a total review of operational challenges and the level of humanitarian need, Merlin began re-establishing its clinics.

"The health care situation is dire and we felt it was essential to return," said Linda Edwards, Merlin's Country Director in Sudan. "The longer people live in these conditions, the more compounded their health problems can become, so our work is vital."



► Combating one of Ethiopia's worst killer diseases

FIELD DIARY

Chief Executive Carolyn Miller spent a week in Ethiopia, where half a million children die every year from diarrhoea. Merlin is working to combat this shocking statistic by improving water supplies and providing health care in some of the country's most remote districts.

Sunday I am met at the airport by Solveig, our Country Director, who briefs me on my schedule. Field visits are a vital part of my role, not just to see first hand what we have achieved, but also to meet the team and the donors who support us. It will take a day and a half by road to reach our project site in the Bale region, south-east of the capital Addis Ababa, so we set off straight away.

Monday The roads are increasingly tough to navigate as we travel to Ginir. Merlin works in some of the most difficult to access areas precisely because others do not, so travelling long distances comes with the job.

We visit Kiteki Kebele, a village where Merlin has restored clean water supplies for 2,000 people. Without safe water, the health threats are even greater, so this has been an integral part of our programme.

Before we started working here, the village well had fallen into disrepair. This meant that people had to collect water from contaminated rivers and springs, resulting in frequent disease outbreaks. Merlin has capped the spring which is now filtered and channelled to a water collection point in the heart of the village.

As we walked to the water point, we were followed by residents keen to tell us what a huge difference it had made. Several women who were queuing up with their water cans said they used to walk for three hours to fetch water. Now it takes them 10 minutes. One lady called Zeina told me her family's health had improved significantly since the new system started operating last December.

Merlin has also raised awareness of how good hygiene helps to prevent diseases. Diarrhoea is responsible for the deaths of half a million children every year in Ethiopia. It's a shocking fact, especially when it's so easily prevented by simple practices such as hand washing, and drinking clean water.



Chief Executive Carolyn Miller visits a water collection point established by Merlin in Kiteki Kebele.



Travelling to the remote Bale region where Merlin works takes a day and a half from Addis Ababa.

Tuesday Today it's a two-hour journey to Sewena where Merlin has built a large pond that will collect enough water in the rainy season for 2,500 people throughout the dry season. Although vital, this is just one step towards helping to address the overall health needs. I am alarmed at the lack of health services – the nearest clinic is 15km away. This is why Merlin has been rehabilitating non-functioning health facilities, and has carried out mobile clinics in isolated communities.

Wednesday On the long journey back to Addis Ababa, we use the time to discuss plans and lessons learnt. At Merlin, we are always looking to transfer knowledge and experience to other programmes.

Thursday – Friday My last two days are packed with meetings with project partners including the UN and the Ministry of Health. We discuss how we could contribute to future programmes. Merlin can offer its expertise, not just in emergency response, but also in making longer term improvements to the health system. We know what works well, and we're keen to see that extended



Women in Kiteki Kebele no longer walk for hours to fetch water thanks to this new collection point in the village.

to other areas. There is much potential for Merlin to have a greater impact in Ethiopia, and I'm looking forward to hearing about the team's progress in the coming months.



► Making an impact on the lives of thousands of earthquake survivors

Ben Twitchin, Assistant to Merlin's Country Director in Pakistan, describes his first visit to the camps and mountain villages where Merlin is continuing to provide health care for thousands of people affected by the October 2005 earthquake:

After working at Merlin's Islamabad office for five weeks, it was time for me to pay a visit to our field sites. The trip north to Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-administered Kashmir is a three hour drive.

Our office there has a very different atmosphere to the one in Islamabad. There is a real sense of action as staff and supplies move back and forth to our field clinics and the camps. Our first visit is to Mera Tenolian, one of 40 camps where Merlin is providing medical care for people who lost their homes in the earthquake. The living conditions left much to be desired, but the camp is well organised, and with Merlin providing health care, people do at least have access to some services which we all take for granted.

The next day we set off for our clinic in Panjkot in the remote Neelum Valley. The clinic is not like your average doctor's surgery. Set up next to the rubble of the original clinic which was flattened by the earthquake, Merlin's facility comprises of a pre-fabricated building used for consultations and the dispensary, and a couple of tents used as treatment rooms and



Merlin's clinic in the remote Panjkot region serves a population of over 12,000 people.

a waiting area. This may not sound like much, but it is the only local health facility for the community, and all services provided are free.

That evening, Merlin doctor Ahreema Hashmi was called to examine a three-month-old baby brought in by her parents. She had been suffering from diarrhoea and was very dehydrated. I stood quietly at the back of the tent while the doctor delicately inserted an intravenous line to give the baby the fluids she desperately needed.

Sadly, I was told the next morning that the baby had passed away. She was simply too dehydrated. What made her story even more desperate is the fact that her parents had twice made the long journey to Muzaffarabad to pay for medical consultations. If she had been brought to Merlin's clinic earlier, she would probably have recovered, but the false impression that paying for treatment will ensure the best care is still prevalent here. This is a part of the culture that Merlin cannot change overnight.

I was impressed by the impact that some well trained staff and a handful of tents have on this community. Without Merlin's presence, mothers would have nowhere to get their children vaccinated; pregnant women would receive no maternal care; children who injure themselves would have no doctor to dress their wounds. It was also humbling to see the dedication of the Merlin team who work and live there. I would imagine that after a while, some of the 'quirks' of living in basic conditions in such an isolated area would start to grate a little.

The last few days have given me a clearer idea of how much Merlin has achieved. It's also been personally rewarding to see how the work I do in Islamabad is helping thousands of people affected by one of the most devastating earthquakes of recent times.



Dr Ahreema Hashmi recently delivered twin girls at the Panjkot clinic.

► Corporate Partnerships News

Energy consultants Power Efficiency have joined forces with Merlin to organise a range of fundraising initiatives. The partnership was officially launched on 4 May, 2007, kicking off an exciting year of fundraising activities and events which will provide motivation, fun and inspiration for all involved!

Man Group has signed up as the first member of Team Merlin, spearheading our corporate initiative. This scheme has been designed with staff motivation in mind, whereby donating the equivalent of one Merlin staff salary for three years, a company's employees can feel that they are 'adopting' a Merlin aid worker.

► If you know a company that may be interested in joining Team Merlin, please contact Charley Stone on 020 7014 1706 or charley.stone@merlin.org.uk.



► Move mountains for Merlin!

Merlin is calling for fit and adventurous people to take part in the Three Peaks Challenge, taking place on 1 September, 2007. Participants will climb the highest mountains in Scotland, England and Wales – all in 24 hours!

The Three Peaks Challenge gives the opportunity to develop leadership, teamwork and relationship building skills, whilst raising essential funds for Merlin.

► If you are interested in taking part, please contact Gayle Woodstock by emailing gayle.woodstock@merlin.org.uk or calling 020 7014 1707.



► Marathon runners raise £50,000 for Merlin

Thank you and congratulations to the 31 dedicated runners who completed the London Marathon in April in aid of Merlin, raising more

than £50,000 for our work. One of Merlin's runners, financial accountant Andrew Mead, explains why he chose to take on this challenge:

I've always wanted to run the London Marathon, having previously completed the Edinburgh and Dublin marathons. Being able to run for Merlin was a dream come true.

The reason I chose Merlin was because my cousin, Vincent Diamond, worked for the charity before he was killed whilst attempting to climb Mount Ushba in the Caucasus in February 2000.

Vincent worked as a technical and logistics officer with Merlin in 10 countries including Rwanda, Congo,

Chechnya, Sierra Leone, Kosovo and Afghanistan. I really wanted to keep his memory alive by raising as much money as I could for the charity that he worked so hard for.

The training was hard during the winter but the motivation to finish the marathon always spurred me on. Marathon day was great, the atmosphere at the start was fantastic and the support received from the crowds was amazing.

As the miles racked up, the urge to stop was ever increasing, but the sight of the Merlin team cheering me on at the 24th mile was fantastic and made me even more determined to keep going.

I managed to finish in 4 hours 22 minutes, very sunburnt and with aching legs, but with an amazing sense of achievement. I'd love to run it again, next time even faster – and not forgetting to put on suntan lotion!

► If you are interested in running the London Marathon for Merlin next year, please contact Kathryn Brooke on kathryn.brooke@merlin.org.uk or 020 7014 1711.

cover image

Merlin has scaled up its operations on the east coast of Sri Lanka, where thousands of people displaced by fighting in the north are now living in camps in the district of Batticaloa.



Merlin is the only specialist UK charity which responds worldwide with vital health care and medical relief for vulnerable people caught up in natural disasters, conflict, disease and health system collapse.

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