

Mamallapuram, January 17, 2005 (night)

Dear friends,

Herewith my first impressions and report.

As I have already let you know in my last letter I have first been in Abu Dhabi for a 24 hours to visit my friend Marc Van den Reeck. Besides the fact that I wanted to see Marc, who is ambassador for Belgium in Abu Dhabi, and his wife Anneta, we also had to discuss some points concerning the concert with Chantal Câlin on March 6, in the " Basiliek from Koekelberg (Marc has indeed persuaded Chantal to give this benefit concert), I did not know exactly what I was going to do in the Emirates. We had however some fruitful talks and Marc would also contact a certain Mr. Pattel (from Indian origin) who stays in Dubai ... At first sight without much importance, but .....

I landed in Chennai, coming from Dubai, Sunday morning at 7 am. Sadish and Ganesan were waiting for me at the airport. It was a strange feeling to see them back, knowing that they could not have been there anymore.

We went immediately to Sint Thomas Mount to hear the story of Sr. Pauline. She just came back from a three weeks stay in the most affected region of South India. She saw thousands of death, as much orphans, widows and widowers and hundreds of thousands of homeless people. I heard the same story from Sr. Madeleine, who worked in and around Chennai. What was I going to find in Mamallapuram ???

As my two previous nights were very short I fell asleep in the back of the car on the way to Mamallapuram and woke up at 1 pm when we arrived in the fishermen's village.

I had such a fright ... It was like a poor refugee-camp at the roadside with in the back what was left from the village. Hundreds of eyes full of hope were fixed on me when I got out of the car. I did not realize where I was and even less what I had started. How could I offer these people a future, worth to live for?

The big plain, situated in the depth between, which I have crossed so many times with my motorbike, was completely filled with earth and stones.

In the front they had placed some comfortless tents, and that's where they live now, my friends!

I want to go immediately to the village, or what is left from it. Surrounded by my fishermen I go in the direction of the sea; the children stay behind, they are afraid of the sea. On the way to the sea I see huts struck down completely, fishermen's nets folded with clothes in between, broken boats. Once we arrive at the huts it becomes even worse, and I realize at what force of nature they have escaped, many others did not have that luck. It may be called a miracle that Sadish' father, 10 minutes before the first wave came, tried to come ashore with his boat, and felt that something was wrong with the sea. This has saved them! They started to evacuate and by the time the second, deathly wave came, they were safe at the street side and they saw how the sea, which is their life, took everything from them. In less than one hour "their sea" took everything from them!

Following their "superstition" it was not favourable to start the discussions immediately. We would come together after 6 pm for a first meeting. It was Sunday and by coincidence (?) just the last day of the "Poongal" (which lasts 3 days), the most important festival of Tamil Nadu. Parents buy new clothes for their children and they have a celebration. There was nothing that indicated that it could still become a feast!

At sunset I went back to hear what we could do and how we would start. With the 15.000 €, which I had with me, (846.000 roepies), we could already do something. It appeared soon that, unlike the other fishermen's communities, they wanted to go back to the sea as soon as possible, to start fishing again.

This was who they earned their daily bread before and that will be the same in the future. We make a list with what is needed most urgently. First nets, for which they need about one month to make them ready for fishing. We would go to Chennai the next morning to buy them; this would cost about 300.000 roepies. Then we had to make the order for some catamarans, buy the necessary wood for it and order the motors.

It would ask all some time, but in 4 weeks it should be possible to be on the sea again. The fact that they could work for a new future, instead of sitting there and looking a whole day at their destroyed village and be remembered the whole time at the tsunami, would give them the strength to continue their live.

In order to be able to put the money in an account here in India, we would go to the bank the next morning to open an account in the name of the fishermen's community. I saw the relief and the hope in their eyes after our meeting.

Notwithstanding the poor conditions in which they live, the mother of Sadish, which I always call my sister, had prepared for me a tasty plate of shrimps in curry. Many amongst you who have been there with me, know what I am talking about. I was ashamed. Not everything was done but they were already convinced that I would do what I could to help them. Tomorrow we continue.

Good night everybody, sleep well and again thanks for your help in their name.

I try to do the same, however it will be difficult when I think how my friends will pass the night a couple of kilometres away.

Namaste

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