

CIVIL PROTECTION DEPARTMENT

SRI LANKA: THE REPORT

HOW WE USED DONATIONS FROM ITALIANS FOR THE TSUNAMI VICTIMS

By GIOVANNI BASTIANINI and AGOSTINO MIOZZO



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PREFACE

by FERNANDA CONTRI

CHAIRMAN OF THE TRUSTEES COMMITTEE

In my city of Genoa, I was recently asked to assume responsibility for a Non-Governmental Organisation with a long history of solidarity and concrete attention to the less fortunate, and for a more recent one whose only human shortcoming was that of a group of administrators who had ended up on trial. I am not surprised at or scandalised by human frailty; I am not surprised that temptation has its victories, especially in a world like that of volunteering, solidarity, and humanitarian aid where interest in others may also be an escape from oneself. But I do get indignant about connivance, cover-ups, the claim that the world is always and only ever grey, that virtues are necessarily sickly and weak behaviour, about those who claim that there is a higher reason that justifies their error. I believe in one's word, given and respected; I believe one can say "yes" or "no"; I believe it is possible to distinguish that which is beautiful and true from that which is a lie and ugly; I believe it is possible to express solidarity and aid honestly and effectively. I believe that the rules of civil life are a heritage built up with infinite effort and suffering by previous generations to raise steam against the discretionary powers of the powerful, in defence of the weak persons. As a judge on the Constitutional Court, I have had the good fortune to be able to explore, study and appreciate the civility of the fundamental laws of the Republic, written to point out a worthy and peaceful way so that we can be a democratic people and country. Reached the conviction that there are no "national" defects and vices, history's authorisations to content ourselves with a weak and tiresome co-existence, to exhausted expectations, to a humanity satisfied only if it gives up dreaming and thinking big. For these reasons, I agreed to take over the chair of a discredited NGO, with a history to be ransomed, which however has around it men and women who are forcefully demanding that the immense dignity of their motivations be restored to them. I received this call almost as if it were compensation for this civil commitment, and I agreed, with great confidence and enthusiasm, to be part of the Trustees Committee for the humanitarian aid operations conducted in Sri Lanka by our Civil Protection Department thanks to the donations it received, almost fifty million Euros. The *Report* which I have the honour to present, and which offers a summary of what Civil Protection did in that country, not only justifies my initial enthusiasm but allows me to call myself fortunate and sincerely proud of having been able

to take part, albeit only towards the end, in one of the finest, cleanest and most effective operations for international peace and solidarity ever conducted by Italy using exclusively civil instruments. Last November the Trustees Committee approved the final report of the *General Programme* undertaken by the Department beginning in January 2005, with the participation of many Italian NGOs and other institutions. The summary is presented in this volume in the form of a report to the millions of Italians who, when that human tragedy occurred, participated with extraordinary generosity in the fund raising organised by many different promoters on behalf of the tsunami victims. I have never encountered so much seriousness and “punctiliousness” about transparency and the duty to report as in the Civil Protection Department, which over these years has worked in Sri Lanka, bearing the responsibility to do good, to act quickly, to bring to a successful conclusion a task it received because of the trust Italians demonstrated in Guido Bertolaso and in the men and women working with him. It is wonderful that in these times of political, institutional and social uncertainty a State agency like the Civil Protection Department demonstrates by its actions its own ability to achieve, to overcome all kinds of difficulties, to work with transparency and integrity, showing itself capable of involving so much of civil society in one of the most ambitious aid programmes ever set up in our country, and being taken as an example even by other countries. I hope that the report contained in these pages, laid out in numbers, words and images, which together describe what Italy was able to accomplish in Sri Lanka, will be appreciated by many Italians for what it is: a civil act – all the more civil because it is unfortunately rare – of homage to the sovereignty of citizens, of respect for a mandate freely given and knowingly assumed as a task, of a sense of responsibility for what is done in the name of our whole country.

The first time I saw Sri Lanka on the pages of my school atlas, it made me think of a pearl, hanging by invisible threads over the calm blue seas of the maps. Geography deceived me, that time; the history of that tormented island opened my eyes, suggesting less poetic and romantic images; Civil Protection has brought me back to that first image, to the close connection between Sri Lanka and something truly precious, of handshakes, of smiles of friendship and solidarity destined to last.

INTRODUCTION

by GUIDO BERTOLASO

HEAD OF THE CIVIL PROTECTION DEPARTMENT

Disaster and catastrophe always have the face, smell and plot of tragedy and death: tens or hundreds or thousands

of victims, proportionately greater numbers of more or less seriously injured, and even greater numbers of survivors who have nothing left but a reserve of life. Anyone who has been involved for any reason in even one of the many tragedies that occur constantly in every corner of the world, sometimes for natural causes – other times through the unexpected and violent expression of what man is capable of doing with his worst side – knows that it is like being bombarded by an avalanche of immediate information. That the senses transmit them to the brain, to be filed away in permanent, unerasable memory: destruction, death, rubble, the bodies of the dead and the injured, the voices, the cries, the silence, the looks of those who have lost everything are all expressed with an overwhelming communicative violence.

As Naomi Klein claims in her recent *Shock Doctrine*, for those who arrive on the scene afterwards, for those who do not feel the tragedy “within” them but rather feel they are part of those who have the means to manage its consequences, a catastrophe can be viewed as a cancellation of what exists and promises infinite opportunities. A pre-existing context to be replaced by an “afterwards” to be created from scratch, to be exploited by starting right away, coldly and realistically, to make business deals right from the very first relief operations.

I am convinced that what Klein writes contains, unfortunately, indisputable elements of truth, since the logic of the business deal, the categorical imperative to make money and accumulate wealth always and at any condition – this occurs without taking into account who ultimately pays the bill for this “growth” loosing in the process – is shared by millions of people in the form of a crude but effective economic ethic of the here and now that is also transcultural and global. However I am convinced that, despite the pervasive logic of economic globalisation, for those who do not feel themselves extraneous to the catastrophe there are immense opportunities for action remaining, to be experienced with a completely opposite form of logic, to react, to help, to stand beside those who have been stricken. These pages contain a story that well illustrates this is the conviction of mine, told in order to enable anyone interested and desirous of gaining a personal idea and evaluating the approach used by us as we related to the catastrophic tsunami that struck Southeast

Asia on the day after Christmas, 2004. This document reports on everything the Civil Protection Department did after that event, continuing a job for almost three years in Sri Lanka that had started out with an entirely different time perspective.

The initial pages contain a summary of our first efforts in three countries in the area struck by the tidal wave, when we sent relief teams and equipment in search of Italians vacationing in those countries, who had shared with the local population the devastating effects of the tsunami and were in serious trouble. Given Italy's distance from the site of the emergency, we organised an air bridge and looked for and found all the surviving Italians and brought them aboard scheduled and leased aircraft – the list of names of our citizens who lost their lives because of the tsunami ended up with fewer names, fortunately, than we had initially feared – after treating the injured and getting them in condition to deal with the trip. We rescued and boarded with us several hundred citizens of other European and non-European countries whom we found together with our citizens, who had no one to aid them or assist them in getting home. Up to that point, for us, it was a normal civil protection operation that was completed in the usual time: On January 3, 2005, all our teams were able to return home, together with the last rescued Italians, after completing their mission. The following pages, which recount the start of our stay in Sri Lanka, also began for us with procedures that we are quite familiar with, those typical of international requests for aid. Calamitous events that are of such proportions as to exceed the capacity of the stricken country to mobilise and respond seem to have grown more frequent, especially in the last few years, and it is by now standard international practice for the country in question to appeal – with good chances of being heard – for aid from other countries outside the disaster area. When the relief operation is useful and feasible, Italy has never said no to an international appeal, and Civil Protection is organised and equipped to respond to these requests for assistance in the emergency phase: in liaison with the local government and our diplomatic representatives, the assistance is organised according to what is happening in the stricken country and what can be done by intervening from outside. Sometimes flights take off with rescue teams, equipment and requested materials on board; at other times, in addition to these shipments, health teams are also organised to set up and operate advanced medical posts or field hospitals. Or we send technicians and experts to the scene who are experienced in managing particular emergencies caused by a specific nat-

ural risk for which we have accrued experience that can also be useful to others, as in the case of volcanic or hydrogeological risk. Italy's Civil Protection is very familiar with this kind of activity, having practiced it in many countries, from Morocco to Iran, from Turkey to Russia, from Indonesia to the United States after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Providing assistance to the local population of Sri Lanka hit by the tsunami, reinforcing the rescue teams on the island, redoubling shipments of tents, first-aid health facilities, medicines and equipment and other materials were all part of a completely standard response for us: if we had not already been on site to assist our citizens, we would have organised to go to Sri Lanka the moment after our government accepted the request for aid from the government of that country.

The duration of these international aid operations is never set a priori but usually ranges from a few days, if we are limited to sending materials and equipment, to a few months, if we assume a commitment to manage first-response reception and health assistance facilities. We stayed in Sri Lanka three years, however, going far beyond the usual time limits and moving from emergency relief management to setting up a complete humanitarian aid programme for the populations stricken by the tidal wave. Why?

The answer lies in two events that occurred on the very days that saw us involved in our work in the area struck by the tidal wave. The first event was the competition of solidarity and generosity in which Italians were key players: the appeals from many organisations collecting funds for the victims of the tsunami received unexpected responses, both in terms of numbers of donors and of amounts of resources collected. In fact, it can reasonably be stated that these funds represent the generosity of every Italian citizen, from all over the country. The second event, completely unexpected, was the request that some collectors of donations made of us that we manage the aid and get it to the stricken populations.

The motivation behind this request: "We trust you." Simple, no beating about the bush, immediate and direct.

Absolutely nothing challenges me and guides me in my actions more than the trust shown to me, because, for me, the only response to trust is a commitment not to betray it, with a surplus of responsibility. This is a "weakness" that I am happy and gratified to share with all my collaborators and with all those – among the many other Italians who think and act

in the same way – who chose Civil Protection as the target in which to invest their days, their nights, their hopes and expectations, their self-realization. That is why this required only a brief consultation with my closest associates, whereas our people already at work in Sri Lanka assured us in words and especially in deeds that we were capable of taking on a commitment of that kind and seeing it through.

The government gave us the go-ahead and we said yes; we took delivery of more than forty million Euros in donations collected by mid-January 2005 – which in the months following became almost fifty million – and we made arrangements to utilise that imposing quantity of resources with a commitment to turn it into concrete aid. But most of all we sought to create the conditions for not wasting or losing any of the enormous capital of trust in us, expressed on behalf of all Italians, that came with the Euros entrusted to us.

In a situation that, in just a few days, saw us take on increasingly demanding commitments in Sri Lanka, we quickly set two objectives for ourselves: the first, to get every available Euro to the recipients, the victims of the tsunami, without waste and as quickly as possible; the second, to work in complete transparency so as to enable anyone interested to monitor our work and verify our ability to meet the commitments made. Anyone with experience in complex humanitarian aid operations knows that these are not easy objectives. The waste of energy, time and resources is an ever-present risk on these occasions, as Agostino Miozzo describes in his testimony. To work quickly without speed itself becoming a source of wastefulness is equally demanding, even though, to our advantage, we had the typical Civil Protection procedures and approaches, which the many victims of the uninterrupted series of calamities that have marked even recent history have taught the value of promptness and urgency, to be calibrated to the needs they face rather than to a pace more congenial to the rescuers. Of the three challenges indicated above, the most complex was that of transparency, of working so as to be able to be monitored, observed and evaluated by everyone. Vincenzo Spaziante, Deputy Head of the Department and my right-hand man for many years, dedicated himself to this with perseverance, making use of his sensitivity, his managerial experience, and his ability to propose and implement effective solutions. I owe him a great deal, and I thank him, including for what he did for me and for all of us in Sri Lanka.

To ensure the transparency of our efforts, we used various tools. Right from the start we set

up a section dedicated to Sri Lanka on the Department Web site, where we published all documents, orders, reports, minutes and accounts of visits and inspections conducted during these years, the official letters sent by the NGOs and by the other organisations that worked with us. We noted our Web site address in press campaigns and TV ads that we produced and published on the anniversaries of the tsunami to recall the generosity of our citizens and inform them that the aid operation in Sri Lanka was continuing. We arranged for official on-site verification missions, involving journalists, television channels, and donor representatives in addition to the authorities. But most of all we assigned the same importance to those who were working to carry out the *General Programme of intervention* managed by us, and to all those we mobilised to monitor and supervise the results and correctness of our behaviours and decisions. We took steps to ensure that, in addition to controls by the state bodies responsible for supervising the work of government agencies, this guarantee function and this possibility of “seeing” extended both during our work in Sri Lanka and after its conclusion to citizens and to all those who donated resources for the populations stricken by the tidal wave in late 2004.

On November 9, 2007, the Trustees Committee, to which I once again extend my profoundest gratitude – you will get to know its composition and function a few page hence – approved the final summary of the General Programme of works and the allocation of the savings achieved during its management, more than seven million Euros.

This volume is a *report to Italians* on everything we did on behalf of the tens of millions of donors who made available to us the resources we needed to operate. We did not feel we were being rhetorical, irrelevant or pretentious when, as we closed each project, we affixed plaques bearing the words “Gift of the Italian People” or when, in the name of all Italians, we turned over to the recipients in Sri Lanka the concrete results of our labour. We simply felt that, in order to respond to the trust put in us, we had to work on behalf of everyone and best represent Italy, its generosity as well as its operational skill, meanwhile preparing the letters and documentation needed to let everyone know how we spent and managed the significant sums that had been entrusted to us.

“Giving an account” is the final phase of any human endeavour which today does not elicit emotion or interest, except when there are scandals or sensational events, but I am convinced that this is not positive. Distraction, forgetting commitments and promises made,

attention suddenly shifted towards only the day's news do not help anyone, not those with a mandate of trust required to "account", not those who give their trust forgetting in turn to ask for an "accounting" of the results. For me, for us, giving an account is something we must do and want to do, the conclusion to a responsibility assumed, the evidence that we kept our word, the "return" in terms of results that we feel we must give to those who trusted us. In e-mail and on cell phones, there is a key that says "Reply to sender." millions of Italians gave us perhaps just one Euro – many of them gave much more – often by SMS, entrusting us with their concrete message of solidarity with those who had suffered the frightening ravages of the tsunami. We used these messages of solidarity, transforming them into aid, and now, with this *Report*, we press the Reply to Sender key to report that the operation yielded good results.

I could end this introduction here were it not for the fact that the General Programme managed by us in Sri Lanka has posted savings of more than seven million Euros, which are still on deposit in the bank account we opened to receive donations. We still have more than seven million Euros in donations in the bank to be invested: why shut down the Programme now and not continue with other initiatives until all the funds entrusted to us have been used up?

Indeed, why shut down the Programme and give an accounting now, when we ourselves are declaring that we will continue precisely in that direction? Although the answer is simple, I feel I owe a precise explanation of this decision, which is shared with me by my collaborators, by the Trustees Committee and by the Donors Committee.

We formally closed the General Programme of aid in Sri Lanka, which was set up at the start of our work in that country, for the same reasons and with the same objectives that we had then: concreteness and transparency. It seemed to us necessary to describe and give a report of what we did, since everything we envisioned doing at the start of 2005 and were able to do in these years has been concluded. The projects indicated in the "table" on our Web site, repeatedly updated after every meeting of the Trustees Committee, are all completed, and in the best possible way, whereas the savings achieved, the sums unspent derive from good management of what we had committed to doing. In this situation, in order not to waste resources and to make our work "trackable" without excessive difficulty, it seemed to us worthwhile to officially sanction the conclusion of the projects set up in

2005 and completed by the end of 2007, and to report on everything achieved, committing ourselves to managing the resources saved during these years on new projects, also approved by the Trustees Committee. Going forward, it will be easier to report on what we are doing new, “freeing” up new projects from the container of closed projects, and it will be easier for us and for the monitoring, control and evaluating bodies to perform their respective functions, each focusing on what is under way without going back each time to open up the book with the account of what is already closed. We will no longer go back to the more than 45 million Euros spent up to now and to what the Programme’s management has cost to us. All this is delivered with this *Report*: from now on, in Sri Lanka, we will write on the blank pages of a new notebook, thinner and more manageable.

This is a second reason that led us to close down the General Programme without waiting for the conclusion of the new commitments: it concerns the nature of the new projects set up to use up the resources made available to us, and the spirit in which we designated and proposed them for approval to the Trustees and the donor representatives.

In January 2005 we established a work plan that was the result of our experience, our presence on site, of the information available to us, of the collaboration of all those who worked with us from the start to help us carry out our commitment of honour to Italians. Two years later, in 2007, we formulated six projects to be carried out in Sri Lanka by the end of next year, simply by putting in order the explicit requests made of us in that country as we completed the last projects, those we closed out by turning over the works to the recipients last August. At the news of our forthcoming departure, there was an increase in requests that we continue doing what we had succeeded in doing, both by the beneficiaries of what we had done – school principals, health directors, community managers, individual family heads, local institutions active in Sri Lanka for the country’s recovery and aid to the weaker segments of the population – and by government authorities. Behind these requests, we could hear the powerful echo of the many “Thanks, Italy” we heard at every final ceremony turning over what we had done, and the sense of trust in our work that grew in Sri Lanka, too.

One request, explicit and precise, moved me deeply, the request that led to the project to assist Sri Lanka’s civil protection, which the Department will manage directly. In the days right after the tsunami, as might be expected, we approached the Sri Lankan civil protec-

tion authorities, expecting to get to work immediately. We found them distracted, interested only up to a certain point: this was the period when high-level delegations from an endless number of countries, international agencies and worldwide NGOs were going around the island from one ministry to another, from one locale to another, promising everything. Sri Lanka's civil protection was the focus of a pilgrimage that lasted months, by possible "donors" of every existing technology, equipment, resources, observation systems and alarms for the population. At that time, our proposals had seemed less interesting than the promises of others. Two years later, the atmosphere is changed; the crowd of donors disappeared: some kept their commitments, many forgot them or deemed them unachievable in a land torn apart by civil war. Today Sri Lanka's civil protection has more resources, although they do not have the tools and technologies needed to make optimum use of them, and it has a hundred-page Plan, the result of work well done by an international agency that delivered the document and left the local authorities with the improbable task of finding the substantial economic resources needed to carry it out. After seeing the results we achieved, they asked us for a hand in building a manageable, effective, functioning "system" in their country, equipped with the minimum resources necessary to provide real "civil protection" for the population. We turned this request into a project, which has been approved and which we present here.

All things considered, the requests we received not to leave Sri Lanka, not to disappear over the horizon, from so many beneficiaries of the work done with the donations are an act of esteem, of appreciation and of trust not just of Italy's Civil Protection – let us not forget that many beneficiaries met managers and operators from our NGOs and other Italian institutions who worked with us – but in our country, in Italy, and in Italians.

For this reason, I close by thanking everyone, donors, authorities, personalities, managers and individual operators of the Department, of the National Civil Protection Service, of the NGOs and institutions that worked with us, making it possible to carry all this through to the end by fully sharing our motivations and our objectives. Finally, I am "forwarding" to all my fellow citizens the sense of this credibility that we managed to build "in the name of the Italian people" with the deeds made possible by the generosity, the spirit of solidarity, concreteness and capability that our country was able to express and convey all the way to the coasts of a faraway land.

