

THE NORTHEAST

Trincomalee and its
immense bay are
perhaps the most
beautiful seaside spot
in all of Sri Lanka





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From any point along the coast just outside the city of Trincomalee, the eye takes in a panorama of water surrounded by green, forested hills, with white-sand beaches shaded by palm trees, just like the typical postcard from the tropics. Under the right conditions, international tourism here could produce a destination known around the world. But to date there is no sign of those conditions.

For years the area has been fought over by the government and the Tamil separatist movement. The consequence is a situation of complete abandonment: no development, no economic growth, little contact with the capital, depending on the back-and-forth of promises and negotiations. The 2002 ceasefire created traffic in people, goods and economic initiatives between Colombo, the centre of the island, and Trincomalee, providing a glimpse of prospects for a better future that is so devoutly wished, especially by the poorest people. On that December 26th morning, the tsunami wave came deep into the great gulf of Trincomalee, rebounding from shore to shore before dying down, after endless minutes of destruction and death. At least initially, the tsunami strengthened the truce, creating dramas and disasters with the blind impartiality of a phenomenon that makes no sharp distinction of religions and ethnic groups and pays no attention to conflicts under way. The government realized it was necessary to allow international aid to get to all the communities stricken by the tsunami and pointed to Trincomalee and its

area as one of the destinations in immediate need of the emergency aid brought to the island by the Department. A few days after the tsunami, an Advance Medical Post and a group of operators from the Department, accompanied by medical personnel and a Firefighters unit, set up at Kinniya, on the inner side of the bay, providing medical assistance, setting up tent camps, and building emergency medical/health-care facilities. This presence and contacts with the local people gave rise to the projects that the Department and the NGOs carried out in the area, and especially north of Trincomalee. At first, our programme also experienced that odd climate of hope for peace, or at least something like it, which the tsunami's destruction seemed to have created in all the inhabitants of the northeast coast. At Muthur, one of the towns on the bay, a fishing town that the wave passed through only to spend itself in the swamps behind it, for several months there was talk of rebuilding the whole village, transforming the lagoon that passed through it, with passage across it determined by the tides, into a sort of canal port, a secure place, a departure point for new measures for growth and peaceful coexistence. Over the span of a few months, however, we understood that the difficulties of negotiating among an infinite number of government agencies, each for its own piece of the pie, the various aspects of such an ambitious and complex project hid far more modest intentions of growth. It was clear then that the talk of peace and the future that was so common in those days was the result of extraordinary emergency conditions rather than of the will of the parties





to reach a solution to the conflict that had the Trincomalee area in its hot grip. In fact, not even a disaster with thousands of victims and tens of thousands left with nothing on the ocean shore was enough to point the way to the end of a war that, even before the unfortunate political decisions, ideologies, discrimination, the choice of violence as the only means of redemption and salvation, was the result of an ancient rivalry and mistrust between two populations who both considered themselves minorities. The Tamils, of Indian origin and mostly Hindus, feel they are a mistreated minority in the country who complain of a worsening of their situation in the years fol-



lowing the end of the British Empire; the Sinhalese, especially those tied to the more orthodox tradition of Buddhism, feel they are a minority compared to the Indian continent, which in geographic terms and population looms over them, and they end up feeling threatened merely by the fact that part of their land is inhabited by people with a different language and culture. In between are the Muslims, who feel threatened by both.

It was in the enchanting setting of Trincomalee Bay that the fragile truce, between hartals – a sort of shutdown and general strike widely used by the Tamils in the area as a form of protects and dissent – provocations and minor clashes, again gave way to the din of heavy arms, bombardments, and clashes on land and sea. For months, all projects stopped; the conflict again forced thousands of people to move, and the towns of Sampoor and Muthur emptied out; three hundred thousand people es-





caped, as the Tamil zones were occupied and rid of any presence even potentially hazardous for the Sri Lankan armed force. Then, when the operations ended at least some of the people began to return, a few at a time, starting with the many Muslims in the area, back to their homes, reopening their shops; fishermen put their canoes and catamarans back out to sea, and even the construction sites were able to resume their activity. But the vast majority of the area's majority Tamil population did not return: many escaped to India by sea, many went west, others went south, taking refuge first around Vakarai and then, when fighting started in that unfortunate little town, farther down the coast, moving from one refugee camp to another. Others were chased back north, towards





the “uncleared” areas where the army had not yet reached, or in the refugee camps around Jaffna, the main city in the north under the control of the regular army, where the inhabitants are kept under a watchful eye by fifty thousand soldiers. In early 2005 one of the Programme projects was carried out in Jaffna. At that time there was even a small airplane that connected Colombo with the main city in the country’s north, but within a few months that link was eliminated. After that, no one but the Sri Lankan armed forces was able to reach the city. Jaffna became a place that had been removed from the civilian community, from which no information came except by word of mouth and haphazard means.

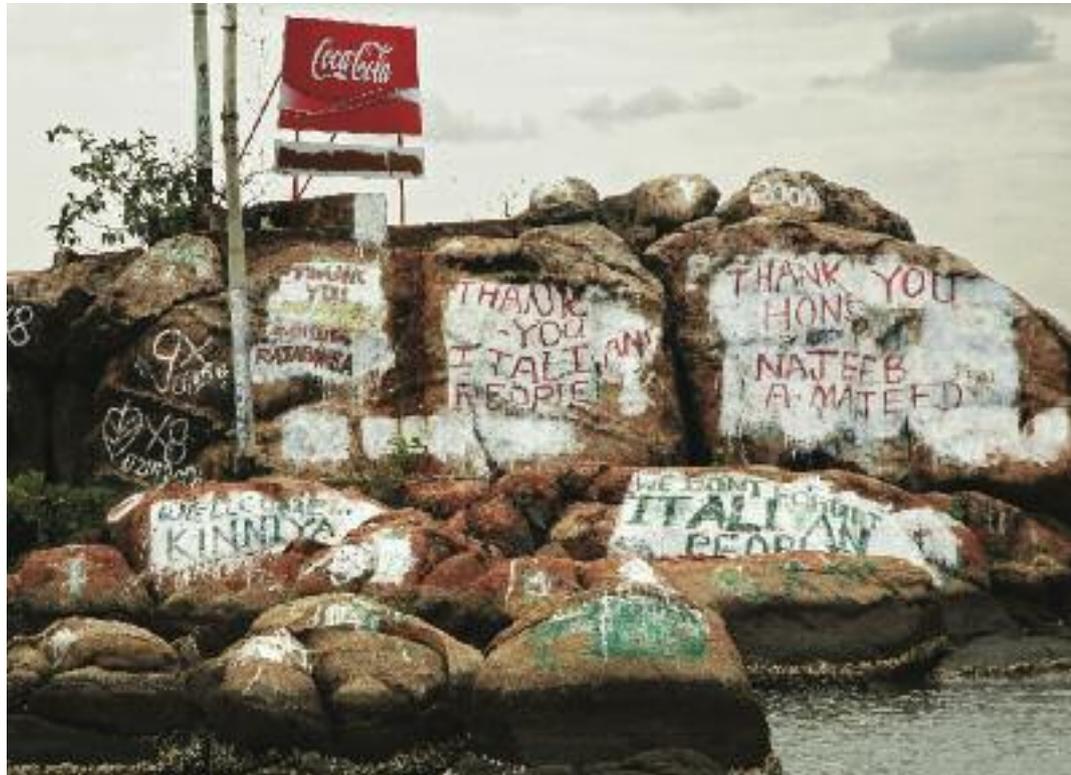
In Muthur, the first projects completed included a series of fish cabins, small structures for weighing and preparing fish for sale, and a pavilion intended to house the local market for the day’s catch. Today these structures, although well preserved, are mostly unused. The reason is sim-

ple: the Navy has decided that only rowboats can be used in the bay, and this in fact makes it impossible to fish.

North of Trincomalee, closer to the area still under Tamil control, the human presence is reduced to a few people, the road is a trail through the jungle except in areas of military interest where the jungle has disappeared on either side of the road, flattened by bulldozers, uprooted and burned, to enable military posts to keep each other in sight. The villages are deserted, abandoned, or reduced to silent, shadowy refuges, watched over



by machine guns and automatic rifles looking out from every high position, from every rock, from every little hillock. Everywhere there is silence, an unsettling silence, the silence of absence, emptiness, fear. Even the animals, the birds and the monkeys seem to have disappeared. The war goes on, and everything seems to verify that peace is still beyond a wall of suffering, pain and death. In the areas that the conflict has left behind, farther south and on the coast, you see a few construction sites, some activity resuming: in short, people are living. Waiting.







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projects