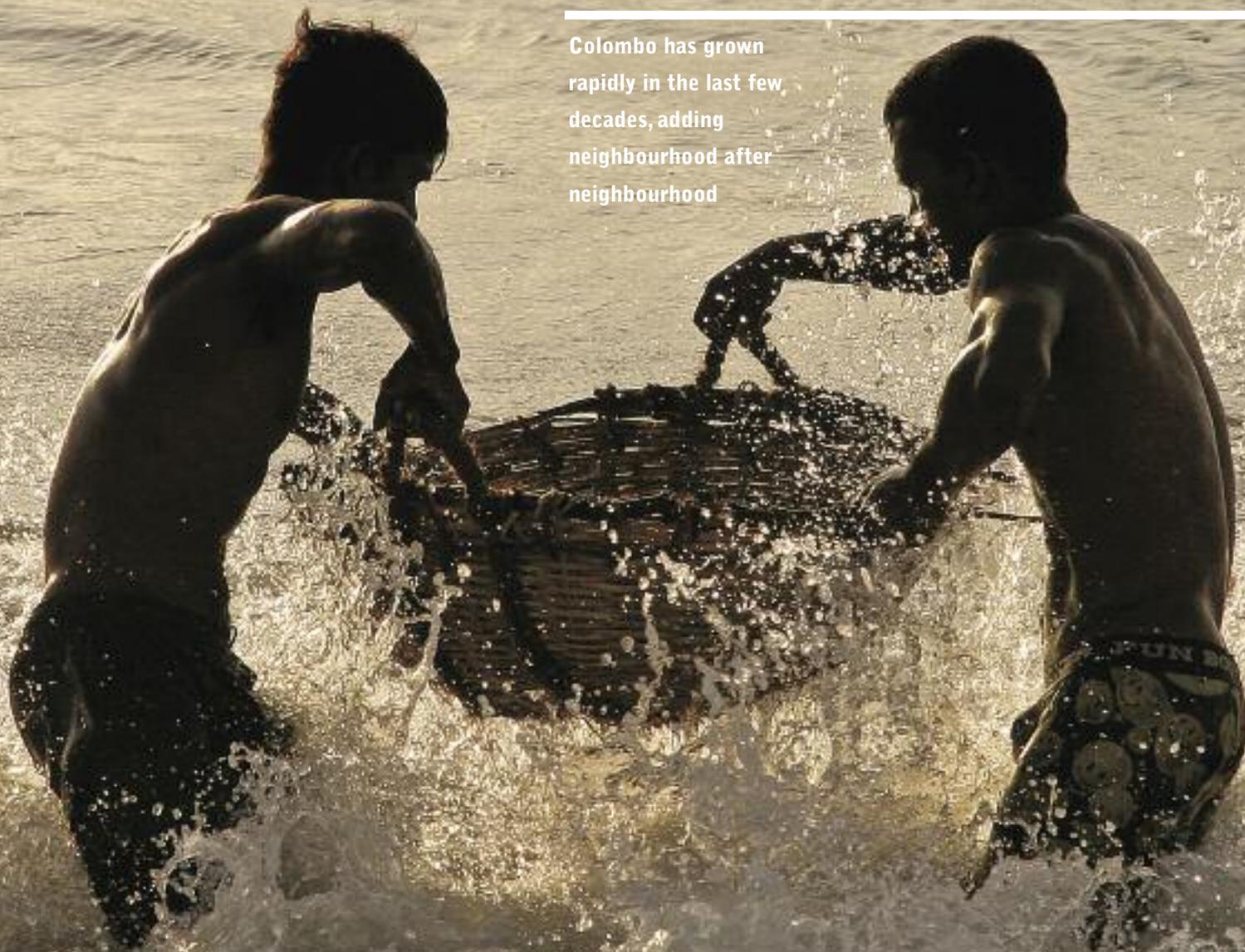


COLOMBO AND THE WEST COAST

Colombo has grown rapidly in the last few decades, adding neighbourhood after neighbourhood





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In a network of streets filled with chaotic traffic, Sri Lanka's capital encompasses vestiges of the British Empire and industrial areas, the old port area and new skyscrapers, government buildings and new residential neighbourhoods, old street markets and barracks for the armed forces and the police, alleyways branching off from a main street and, in just a few meters, going from shantytowns to new shopping centres, areas just recently reclaimed and built up, and former villages that are not completely swallowed up by the city.

Colombo has grown especially along the coast: to the north, along the road to the airport, near the old city of Negombo, and, to the south, on Galle Road, once the capital's main street: For at least forty kilometres in either direction, one never gets the impression of leaving the city, even though one passes through various municipalities.

One constant everywhere you go is the concert of horns that never stops all day long, from dawn to dusk, accompanied by the unpleasant din of all types of period motors starting up at the traffic lights. Here and there, in market areas, human voices are raised to make themselves heard. Driving along in a car, past Buddhist temples and mosques, you hear the echo of religious chanting, but these are distorted, amplified sounds, electronic prayers that long ago replaced the human voice and instruments, in the customary and globalised attempt to reconcile spirituality and cost reduction, which even here yields results of little value.



Amidst all the chaos of the streets, the motorcycles, cars, trucks and tuk-tuks, it is not unusual to come across all sorts of animals, especially cows, wandering free, and dogs everywhere, and goats. Outside Colombo, one comes across even more animals: monkeys, snakes, elephants. No one gets upset or irritated; even the more reckless drivers slow down and stop to let them pass. At least relations with the animal kingdom could be said to be marked by the greatest tolerance.

Colombo is a multiethnic city where all the island's ethnic groups and religious confessions live together, along with people from every part of Asia and the world, attracted to the capital by the range of economic opportunities, by trade and political alliances. Buddhist and Hindu temples, mosques, churches of every Christian confession often stand next to one another; neighbourhoods are sometimes characterised by a predominant ethnic group, but in other cases it is difficult to tell whether you are in a Muslim area or a primarily Tamil block.

The entire city is a succession of roadblocks, with military men and police officers watching the vehicles slowed down by mazes and obstacles, created precisely to slow down traffic so they can stop and check



someone from time to time. When the checkpoints become more numerous and the checks more careful, it means that tensions are rising again. These roadblocks on the street and the constant presence of armed soldiers and policemen are the most visible sign of the conflict that pits the government against the “terrorists” – the tough, explicit term that gained new legitimacy here too after September 11 – of the Tamil military groups; a conflict that even in the recent past has been expressed in attacks, shootouts and

bombings, creating a “threatened city” syndrome in the capital.

Since independence, all the opportunities and growth have been concentrated here – outside this area, only the southern and central parts of the island have experienced economic modernity – and with the growth of the tourist industry, the Colombo metropolitan area has ended up steadily attracting new residents in search of opportunities for employment, survival and – why not? – wealth. Many Sri Lankans have come to the capital and then managed to hit it big in the most diverse economic sectors: construction, trade, restaurants, services, of-





fices, engineering, electronics and computers, finance and credit. When you run into them, they gladly describe to you their humble origins and their story, as in any country where at least some of today's wealth is young and requires no effort to recall previous generations. But even here the percentage of those succeeding is a small minority among the many who initially shared the same hopes, and it is obvious.

Now, a not always happy economic outlook and the weight of a war that has never really started turning into peace – the country's armed forces, comprised mainly of the Sinhalese alone, and the police force are frighteningly huge – are creating new tensions in much of the population, which feels its quality of life threatened by double-digit inflation and increasingly uncertain job prospects. But, as in many other parts of the world, one needs to pay attention in order to pick up these signs of discomfort, which are credible

when expressed in private conversations but largely exploited and amplified by the constant clash among parties that characterises the uneasy, restless and easily changing political life of Sri Lanka.

The tsunami did not hit Colombo, except for a few breakers higher than usual generated by the passing of the wave to the south, flooding a few coastal areas and destroying a few already dilapidated huts.

In this chapter, we have included a series of projects that the Department developed in direct cooperation with the central authorities, the agencies and a few ministries, or with international organisations headquar-





tered in the capital that then worked in other areas of the country hit by the tsunami. But the first project that opens this series involves Negombo: here a major structural task was undertaken, the construction of a village for the tsunami victims. The project's beneficiaries are refugees from stricken areas who sought refuge in Negombo and were taken in by the Salesians – who, in the only Sri Lankan city with a strong Catholic presence, have homes, schools and training institutes – in a tent camp set up on the grounds of a secondary school. After this first reception phase, the Salesians called up their NGO, VIS, to provide the families with permanent housing.





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projects