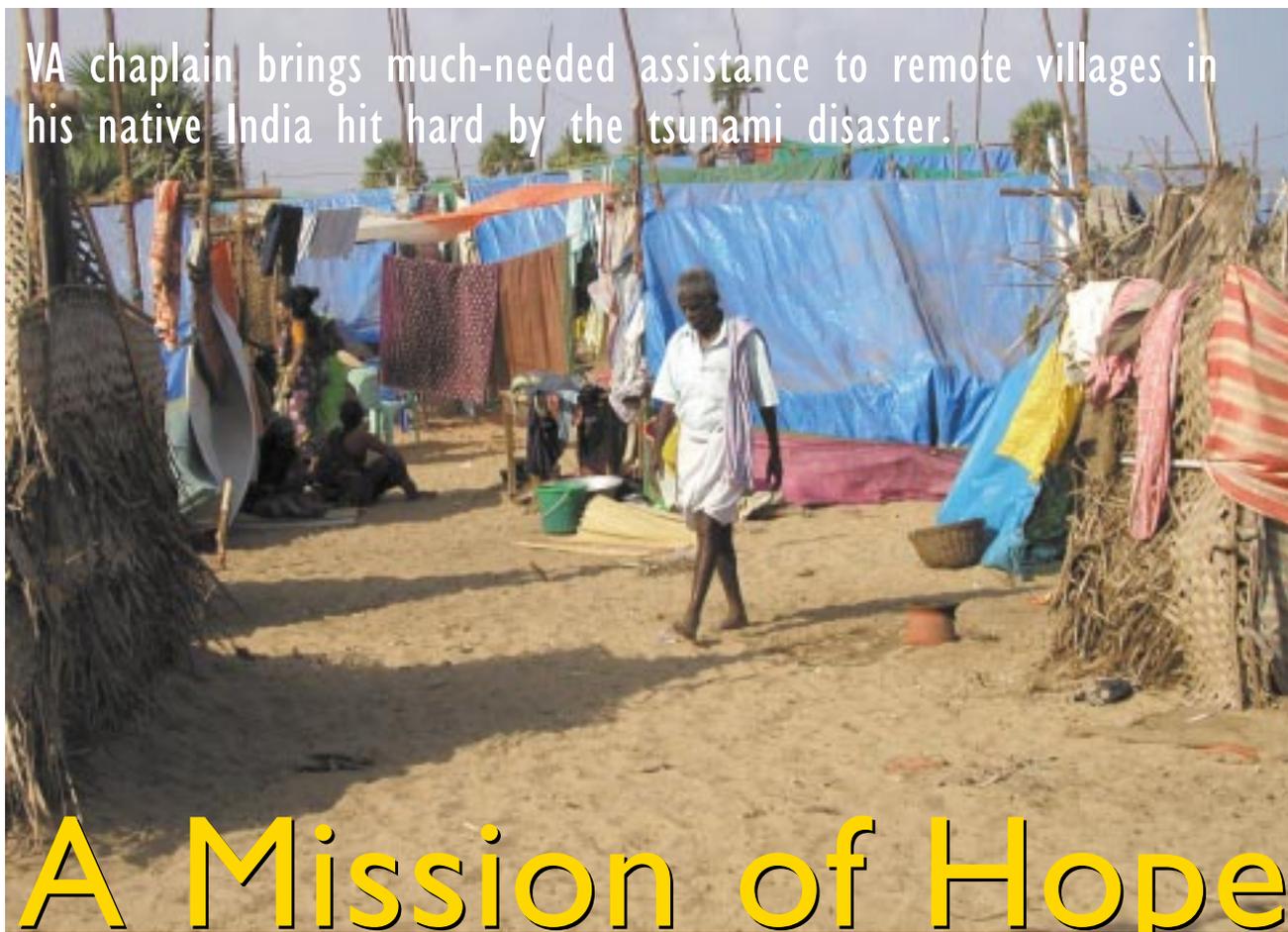


VA chaplain brings much-needed assistance to remote villages in his native India hit hard by the tsunami disaster.



A Mission of Hope

COURTESY OF BEN CHINNAPPAN

Providing emotional support and guidance to veterans who have experienced great loss or tragedy is part of a VA chaplain's job description. Visiting the victims of the tsunami disaster and offering them this same kind of assistance in their time of need was the experience of a lifetime for Father Benjamin Chinnappan, a chaplain at the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital in suburban Chicago.

"Father Ben," as he is called by Hines staff and patients, was born and raised in southern India, an area hit hard by the tsunami disaster. When he heard about the disaster on Dec. 26, he immediately sprang into action, organizing a humanitarian relief mission to remote villages in India affected by the tragedy.

"I had a hard time sleeping or eating when I heard about what was

going on in India," he said. "Over 2,000 people were killed in the diocese where I used to work. I knew I had to go there in person and offer my support to the people."

Father Ben spent long hours gathering supplies and organizing volunteers to assist him on his trip to India. He planned to leave a little over three weeks after the tsunami struck and aimed most of his efforts at supporting the people with medicines, comfort and counseling, and other critical supplies. As word of his mission spread, a number of Hines employees donated money to his cause. He was particularly impressed with the generosity of a local veteran.

"I spoke about the tsunami at Mass one day and later a veteran approached me in the canteen," Father Ben recalled. "He told me that he



JERRY MALONEY

Ben Chinnappan and his group distributed medicine and supplies to displaced families in India (top).

felt moved to contribute to the cause and gave me a check for a hundred dollars to go to the cause. I knew that he could ill afford to give this money, but he insisted. He is truly an example of a generous soul."

When Father Ben and his group arrived in India, they were immediately struck by the intensity of the

loss there. "The magnitude of this disaster really is beyond description," he said. "Hundreds of people are living in refugee camps with two families crammed into every tent. The people are so traumatized by the tragedy that many of the fishermen are unable to even go near the ocean."

Father Ben and his group traveled to several extremely remote villages that had so far not been recipients of much international aid. The group distributed donated medicine, cooking supplies, food and other essential items to people in need. Most importantly, however, Father Ben and his volunteers stressed to the people they visited that they were not alone in their grief and loss.

"There is no greater contribution than being there in person to share in the pain that these people have endured," he said. "We spent long hours listening to the children tell us what happened to them that day and what has happened to them since the tragedy. Just listening to them is an affirmation of their losses."

In addition to distributing medicine and essential supplies to hundreds of displaced families in the region, Father Ben and his group made a special effort to reach out to the children who were affected by the tsunami. They purchased school bags, school uniforms and Beanie Babies for hundreds of children and gathered the kids together to give them a forum to talk about their losses and feelings about the tragedy.

"One little boy told us how he and his mother had to run for their lives when the tsunami hit," Father

Ben said. "They were forced to leave their elderly grandmother behind and she was badly injured. The boy was deeply traumatized by the whole thing and wanted to tell us all about it. When we heard these kinds of stories, we were speechless."

Although he was deeply affected by seeing firsthand the devastating effects of the tsunami, Father Ben noticed a number of positive things in India. "As a result of this tragedy, people of all religions, economic backgrounds and ways of life have come together. It was amazing to see how the tragedy has brought



The aid workers led by Chinnappan made a special effort to reach out to children. Here, he holds a backpack full of toys as a boy makes his choice.

these groups together in a way that I've never seen before."

In addition, Father Ben was impressed with the priorities of the people who lost their homes, livelihood and friends in the disaster. "They didn't complain about lacking basic needs like bathroom facilities, running water or food. All they wanted was a little assistance getting back to work so they can support themselves with dignity."

Father Ben has a history of reaching out to the people in his homeland. In 2000 he established

an organization called Dalit Solidarity, aimed at supporting the children in the lower castes in India. He established an orphanage for these children where they can receive an education and financial assistance. His organization also sponsors yearly trips to the area by nurse practitioners to conduct first aid classes for remote villages far from hospitals and clinics.

Through his organization, Father Ben is still raising money for the victims of the tsunami and plans another trip to India in September. His main goal is to come up with

enough money to help fishermen in the area buy fishing boats and nets so they can get back to work.

Since his return to the United States and his job at Hines, Father Ben has been besieged with requests from fellow VA employees, patients and the community to share his experiences. He has a remarkable collection of photos and many fascinating stories to tell about the places he visited and the people he met.

"The people we met were touched that

we came all the way from the United States to bring messages of hope and caring," he said. "In return, we were inspired by their dignity, determination and faith in the future. It was a very rewarding but painful experience." **VA**

By Maureen Dyman

Editor's Note: To find out more about Father Ben's mission or to donate to his cause, go to www.dalitsolidarity.org or write to: Dalit Solidarity Inc., P.O. Box 112, Hines, IL 60141.