

BUILDING PEACE, REBUILDING LIVES

A witness to the tsunami that devastated the coast of Sri Lanka, Valerie Raymond has been consumed by the aftermath of one of the greatest natural disasters in the region's history.

On December 26, Valerie Raymond, Canada's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, like many other Canadians, was enjoying a few days' holiday. As fate would have it, Ms. Raymond and her partner were at a resort near Galle on Sri Lanka's southwest coast and experienced first-hand the devastating tsunami that so dramatically affected the island—and the world—that day.

The two watched from their second-storey room as the sea eerily receded and then surged to shore. But it wasn't until the water was calm once more and she went downstairs that Ms. Raymond began to grasp the devastation the waves had wrought: the hotel lobby gutted, shops destroyed, concrete walls flattened and cars strewn about like toys.

Sri Lanka was hard hit by the tsunami, with more than 30,000 deaths and vast stretches of coastal areas ruined. Since she found her way back the following day to the mission in the capital of Colombo, a city on the coast that escaped the ravages of the tsunami, Ms. Raymond's life and job have been consumed by the disaster.

Initially, consular matters took priority, with those in the High Commission spending exhausting days helping to account for Canadians in Sri Lanka, finding them accommodation, contacting their families and easing their way home. Ms. Raymond

and her staff also worked closely with officials in Ottawa on Canada's humanitarian response to the tsunami, a key part of which was bringing the 200-member Disaster Assistance Response Team to provide medical support, clean water and other assistance to the island's devastated Ampara district.

Ms. Raymond lauds the dedication and professionalism of the hard-working Canadian and locally engaged mission staff, as well as the temporary reinforcements sent by Foreign Affairs Canada. She has been inspired by the resilience of the Sri Lankan people, whom she has come to know well through Canada's efforts in support of ending the country's long-standing and brutal civil war.

The conflict zone in the northeast was badly hit by the waves, Raymond says. "Many of these people had suffered for many years before the tsunami and now have to face another disaster. The devastation and the destruction are absolutely heartbreaking." Yet, she adds, there have been heartening stories of people from the country's three main groups—the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims—helping each other.

Being centrally involved in a front-page disaster is perhaps ironic given that Ms. Raymond, who was born in Winnipeg and was "a news junkie from a young age" growing up in Edmonton, began her career as



photo: Nick Westover, FRC

a reporter for *The Ottawa Citizen* in the mid-1970s.

She moved on to a series of communications positions in the government and in 1986 joined the Department of External Affairs and International Trade to work in a series of senior jobs. "I had the good fortune to come of age just at the time in the late 1970s when doors were opening to women," Ms. Raymond says.

She served as Canada's High Commissioner to New Zealand from 1997 to 2001.

Ms. Raymond plans to return to Ottawa when her three-year appointment to Colombo ends this summer, but life after the tsunami won't ever be the same. Each evening, she looks at the seashells she collected while strolling on the beach near Galle on Christmas Day and tries to comprehend the force of nature that took so many lives yet spared her own. "I don't think we can try to understand these things. We simply have to try to make a small difference, and that's very sustaining." 🍁

Canadian High Commissioner Valerie Raymond on Sri Lanka's coastline near Colombo: "I don't think we can try to understand these things. We simply have to try to make a small difference, and that's very sustaining."