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An Undignified Postscript for Sri Lanka's Dead

In death, as in life, the gap between the rich and the poor is wide.

As rich countries work to identify their tsunami victims, the poor island nation uses mass graves.

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KURUNDUATA GALLE, Sri Lanka — At the Colombo National Hospital in the capital, the bodies of foreigners are brought to a lab where they're numbered and photographed.

Clothes, jewelry, tattoos, body piercing and teeth are carefully scrutinized. Blood and DNA samples are taken. Then the bodies are carefully stored in refrigerated containers until they can be identified and transported back to their home countries.

A different ritual unfolds 70 miles south in the hills above the city of Galle. A truck designed to carry telephone poles pulls up on a dirt road and disgorges the bodies of Sri Lankans on land that was once a palm oil plantation. Several dozen decomposing bodies are dragged off the truck and placed on a makeshift stretcher made from a wooden door before they are dumped into a quarter-mile-long mass grave holding about 1,600 corpses.

In death, as in life, the gap between the rich and the poor is wide. As Western governments go to great lengths to recover and identify the bodies of their nationals, an overwhelmed and impoverished Sri Lanka has little time for science or ceremony in its rush to avert a health crisis.

"It's very painful never really knowing what happened to the bodies," says Sumathi Saranachchi, 32, a hotel worker who fears that his 5-year-old niece and 7-year-old nephew, swept away in the Dec. 26 tsunami, might be in one of the mass graves in the Kurunduata Galle area.

"We have a foreign friend, they found and took the body out," Saranachchi says. "Sri Lankans, they disappear, they're burned or put underground in a big hole. Dead is dead, but it could bring more peace to know what happened."

Western countries plan to push even harder in the next few weeks to find the bodies of missing nationals and avoid politically explosive accusations that they didn't do enough. The forensic experts they sent to Sri Lanka are recommending that several mass graves, such as this one at Kurunduata Galle, be dug up to search for the bodies of Westerners believed to be commingled with those of thousands of local tsunami victims.

"Identifying bodies in these mass graveyards is a problem," says Pujith Jayasundara, Sri Lanka's senior police superintendent. "But if the foreign experts want to go to the expense of checking, if they can identify one body in there, they can go ahead. We don't have such developed technology."

Shortly after the tsunami struck, the head of the Sri Lankan police issued an order that the bodies of foreigners should not be buried but sent to the lab. In the initial chaos, however, villagers weren't aware of the order and buried bodies indiscriminately.

The government has instructed local authorities to mark, protect and preserve the mass-grave sites, until foreign governments decide what they want to do. About 1,000 of the more than 4,000 bodies recovered in the area around Galle have been identified, local police say.

S.Y. Amarasiri and Raveendra Sarath Kumara, who work as security guards at a school, have spent much of the last two weeks in the jungle at Kurunduata Galle trying to ensure that bodies aren't dug up by wild boars, eaten by 5-foot-long monitor lizards or disturbed by thieves looking for jewelry.

Trucks periodically arrive with loads of bodies. But most of the time it's quiet, almost peaceful, with the sun streaming through palm trees.

The two guards, dressed in gray uniforms, remember the first body they saw in late December, that of a thin man brought the day after the tsunami. He was about 35, less than 5 feet tall and wearing a sarong. Later, the bodies came in such a rush that the guards could recall only the most dramatic cases: mothers with children locked in their arms, babies still holding pacifiers in their mouths, young girls full of innocence.

At the peak, the fourth or fifth day after the tsunami, the bodies arrived 100 at a time. It has since slowed to a trickle.

Amarasiri and Kumara say guarding the dead has left them with nightmares, and with the realization that life is fleeting. They say they are haunted by the expressions on the victims' faces. The mouths and eyes of some were agape, apparently frozen in fear. Others seemed totally at peace, their eyes shut, appearing calm, even sleepy.

The men watch as giant bulldozers push the dirt over the remains. A few bodies leave clues as if to fight anonymity: part of a sarong still peeking through, a pant leg, a clump of black hair.

Villagers stop occasionally to light candles at the site, often without knowing whether their relatives are buried here.

Amarasiri and Kumara say they have developed a bond with the unidentified souls, whom they refer to as "our brothers and sisters."

"I'm very sad, it's just sadness from the day the waves hit until now," Amarasiri says. "My heart doesn't have enough room to hold all this pain."

The foreign pathologists, dental specialists and forensic experts working in labs in Colombo try to keep emotion at a distance. Although the scale of this disaster is greater than anything they've seen, they say, the work is qualitatively the same.

"A body is a body," says one foreign official, speaking on condition of anonymity, citing the political sensitivity of his work. "We've all seen a number of them. We have a job to do."

Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Britain had some of the largest numbers of vacationers in Sri Lanka. Their forensic teams have been heading searches for foreign victims.

The United States was relatively lucky in Sri Lanka, with fewer than 20 Americans still unaccounted for, said Chris Long, a U.S. Embassy spokesman.

Members of the foreign forensic teams focused initially on taking pictures and recording descriptions so relatives could identify their loved ones, but the tropical heat caused bodies to rot quickly and become unrecognizable, forcing pathologists to turn increasingly to technology.

Ronald Noble, the head of Interpol, arrived in Sri Lanka on Tuesday, toured the southern part of the country by helicopter and offered the government access to the agency's DNA database, as well as communication assistance and other help in identifying the dead.

Most Sri Lankans understand that their government can't match the foreign resources, and that it has had to resort to mass burials to prevent an outbreak of disease, but that hasn't eased their grief.

At the Karapitiya Hospital in Galle, businessman P. Shiva and three friends are looking

for information about a missing friend, Shiva Kumran. They pore over photographs, taped to walls, of unidentified bodies and read notes left by desperate relatives. They've been searching hospitals and police stations along the coast since their friend disappeared after the tsunami. Kumran's wife is six months pregnant, they say, and they haven't told her that he is missing.

In Sri Lanka, tradition dictates that the deceased be displayed at the house for several days so neighbors and friends can pay their final respects. Mass graves and the large number of unidentified bodies threaten to create legal, social and psychological problems as survivors try to rebuild their lives, says Maleeka Salih, a psychologist in Colombo with the Psycho-Social Support Program, a civic group that provides post-trauma stress counseling.

By law, family members must wait a year after a loved one's death — if the body is missing — before they can receive insurance benefits or government compensation, a concern for many who have been left penniless by the disaster. And not being certain that a loved one is dead affects the mental health of surviving family members, Salih adds.

Many Sri Lankans also believe that it is important to provide a proper burial to ensure the goodwill of a supreme being and that spirits don't return to roam on Earth.

Amarasiri, the security guard, says the deceased can find a small measure of peace in the jungle at Kurunduata Galle.

"At least they've been taken away from the seaside and put up in the hills where they don't have to fear the sea," he says. "I feel they're in a safe place now."

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