

Making a difference

MCC President Christopher Martin-Jenkins on the Sri Lankan charity that's changing lives

“ Sri Lanka is a beguilingly beautiful island. Despite the heat it lures visitors back, not least because they always receive such a smiling welcome from everyone they encounter. Yet, to the outsider, the teardrop at the foot of India is, socially, something of an enigma. The armed soldiers still so evident in Colombo during the recent ICC World Cup are proof, alas, that not all the dust has settled following the brutal end, in 2009, to a Civil War that lasted nearly 40 years.

The war put large areas of the north and east of the island out of bounds to tourists. Yet in my experiences of watching some of the most gifted cricketers in the world in a land that must number a higher intensity of cricket lovers per head of population even than India or Barbados, this is overwhelmingly a happy place inhabited by hospitable people.

On the cricket fields they have plenty to smile about, of course. Sri Lanka have generally had the better of England in recent times, thanks to a school system that produces a continuous flow of good players. Coaches who developed gifted and well groomed cricketers like Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayawardene have



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also had the wisdom not to try to change completely original talents like Muttiah Muralitharan and Lasith Malinga.

Sangakkara, Murali and Chaminda Vaas are all trustees of a charity called the Foundation of Goodness, whose mission is to help deprived rural communities realise their potential. It was founded by Kushil Gunasekera, a transparently good man of tremendous drive and compassion, who wants to do for the Tamils of the north and east what his organisation has already achieved for tsunami victims in the south following the terrible catastrophe on Boxing Day in 2004.

During the World Cup, in my capacity as president of MCC,



The Foundation of Goodness established the Sri Sumangala Cricket Ground in Hikkaduwa



Ian Bell was on hand to help the Sri Sumangala opening go with a swing



Mike Brearley (centre) in Sri Lanka with MCC's John Stephenson and Keith Bradshaw



away close to the point where over 1,000 died in a train. He gave his ancestral home, structurally intact despite being hit by the second wave, as the base for the MCC Centre of Excellence. It is now a medical and educational complex staffed by

I was taken to a town called Mankulam, 56 miles from the mainly Tamil city of Jaffna, which is intended to be the educational and recreational fulcrum of an urban development scheme planned for the resettlement of an estimated 200,000 people who were left without homes. MCC is staging a fundraising dinner at Lord's on 8 June (places are still available as I write) to raise money to support a project there that is just beginning under the direction of the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation. Murali and several other famous cricketers,

including Mike Atherton and Mike Brearley, will be at the dinner.

So will the inspirational Kushil, trustee for the scheme to build a cricket ground and school on land at Mankulam granted by the government to Murali as reward for his achievements on the field. If the new project is as well conceived and maintained as its model, the sports centre and cricket ground built after the tsunami at Seenigama in the south-west, it will be inspiring and life-enhancing for thousands.

Seenigama, Kushil's home village, was more or less swept

professionals and volunteers, servicing people of all ages from 28 local villages, entirely without charge.

The emphasis is on empowering people to find decent employment and on lifting their standards of hygiene and of living generally. Graduates of the educational schemes now teach there themselves and the scheme is run without any corruption by highly committed people. If cricket can fuel a similar revival at Mankulam, it will be no less a force for good.