



## **Tsunami-Relief Student Volunteers Create Sporting Festival For Youth**

March 24 2007 — Samanthampettai, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu

This year 130 students came from Japan to help with Amma's tsunami-housing project. They came from 15 different universities in Tokyo and other parts of Japan. The students are part of the International Volunteer University Student Association (IVUSA), an organization for students interested in doing volunteer work and selfless service. IVUSA has been helping Amma's Ashram construct houses for the poor since 1998, and this was the second year in a row that they were stationed in Nagapattinam.

The IVUSA students are amazing workers and are especially good at work as a team. They are also very disciplined. They divided themselves into 18 teams, with each team having a group leader. Teams made work plans and had nightly meetings to discuss the problems and successes of each day's work.

In my opinion the most amazing part about the two weeks the students spent helping with tsunami construction in Nagapattinam was the Sports Festival they arranged for the tsunami-affected children. It was an amazing program and unforgettable for both Japanese students and local people.

The event was highly organized and full of fun activities for the children. There was an opening ceremony, a track race, a three-legged race, obstacle courses, a relay race, a drawing contest, cultural programs by both the Japanese students and the village children, as well as two Japanese games—*tamairi* and *tsunahiki*. (The first involves two teams throwing balls into baskets, and the latter is a form of tug-of-war.) There was also a closing ceremony and *payasam prasadam* for more than 1,000 people.

Even though it has been two years since the tsunami and many people have started to forget that tragic day, thousands are still living in difficult conditions and many more have sorrow still in the heart. With this Sports Festival, it was the aim of the IVUSA students to help the tsunami victims forget their pain and replace their sorrowful memories with some joyous ones.

There are some temporary shelters constructed by the Ashram near Samanthampettai. It is here that the people live who will move into the houses the Japanese students were helping construct. Every time the students drove past the shelters on their way to work, all the children living there would line up and energetically shout "Hi!" and "Om Namah Shivaya." All 150 children living in the temporary shelters were invited for the Sports Festival, as well as another 150 from Samanthampettai. Their parents and other villagers also came along.

The event was held in a large open space near a tsunami-relief village community already constructed by the Ashram. It was the spot where all children would regularly gather in the evening to play cricket. However, the field was full of garbage and nasty plants with big thorns. One day before the big event, all the Japanese students came to this field and picked up garbage and leveled the ground. Surprisingly, watching them work inspired the local children to join in.



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Next the Japanese students went to a market and bought paper and cloth to make costumes and decorations, etc. They made very nice decorations using the minimum expenses. They also wanted to decorate the Sports Festival using drawings done by the children themselves. So it was also decided to hold a drawing contest.

Each day the students would work hard digging, laying concrete, filling sand, loading and unloading thousands of blocks at the construction site. Then when that was finished, they would stay up preparing for the Sports Festival until 2 am.

On the day of the actual event, the students expected some difficulties in teaching the rules to the children, but they understood very quickly and were really enthusiastic for everything new. They enjoyed the sports as well as interacting with the Japanese students. The event was a grand success with everyone participating enthusiastically and applauding vigorously. There air was filled with happiness and innocence.

The children's faces were lit up with big smiles as they ran after the Japanese students. Seeing the children smiling brought big smiles to the faces of the Japanese students as well. The barriers of language and cultural differences were transcended by the heart-to-heart communication, and everyone became as one. Amma and her grace were there with us all those days. It felt like we all were having a big darshan at the same time.

? by Vivek (Japan)

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