

Tsunami disaster – countries in crisis

Bilal Rajan: UNICEF's youngest fundraiser and advocate

By Tani Ruiz



© UNICEF Thailand/2005/PdJ

Bilal Rajan (centre) happily playing with smaller kids at a child centre in the Tub Lamu Navy Base in Phang Nga province, Thailand. UNICEF helped repair the centre after it was damaged by the tsunami.

TORONTO, Canada, 21 March 2003 - Bilal Rajan is an eight-year-old boy who has big dreams. Bilal wants all children around the world to be treated equally, and have the things he has growing up in Canada. With that objective in mind, Bilal single-handedly raised C\$50,000 for children affected by the recent tsunami. He also launched a campaign with UNICEF Canada days after the disaster to raise more funds in order to help children and their families in need.

Bilal, UNICEF's youngest fundraiser, advocate and spokesperson, ate, slept and breathed the tsunami. He gave talks at schools, made cold calls to companies, sold hand-made arts and crafts, spearheaded special events, and even created his own website – all to help children suffering from the tsunami a world away from his native Toronto.

The Canadian public responded quickly. Soon a total of almost C\$2 million - close to double the amount Bilal had envisioned - was collected. But Bilal wanted more. He wanted to see firsthand not only the damage caused by the tsunami, but also the good will being done with the funds he and children across Canada had raised. "I asked my parents and UNICEF Canada if I could visit the countries worst affected by the tsunami," said Bilal.

In the second week of March, he and his parents set out for Asia, their suitcases literally void of clothing, and instead stuffed with gifts for the children.



© UNICEF Thailand/2005/PdJ

Bilal (standing) tours a damaged classroom at the Ban Tub Lamu School.

Thailand was the family's first stop in what is a three-week programme including visits to the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Their UNICEF-assisted tour around Phuket and badly hit Phang Nga province was in Bilal's parents view, a real "eye-opener."

Over the course of two days, Bilaal and his parents witnessed heavily damaged schools, the largest emergency shelter for survivors, and an early childhood centre, all of which are supported by UNICEF.

"The debris and destruction was worse than I thought it would be," concluded Bilaal, who combines charm and humour with intelligence beyond his years.

In an address to students at Ban Tab Lamu School in Phang Nga province, Bilaal commented, "My belief is, why shouldn't all children around the world have exactly what we in Canada have, and what we in Canada take for granted." He told the class of 11 and 12 year olds, "I think there should be equality and fairness for children everywhere."



Bilaal (wearing cap) with his friends at Tab Lamu School.

© UNICEF Thailand/2005/PdJ

After his speech concluded, it was time to hand out the gifts - everything from pens, erasers, stickers and rubber balls, to frisbees, soccer balls and games - all tenderly placed by Bilaal into the eager hands of Thai boys and girls.

Bilaal was especially moved by Ban Nam Khem fishing village, where 1,500 people - one quarter of the population - died from the giant waves. Fortunately the village is rebuilding and Bilaal was cheered by the fact that so many affected children are back at school.

"I want the children to have nice schools, good education, health, clean water and all the normal necessities," he told a local television station. "I would also like to see the smiles back on the faces of all children and the sparks of joy in the eyes of all children."

When he returns to Canada at the end of March, Bilaal will be busy updating the schools and reporting on his trip. "I will tell them back at home that people here are getting better, that homes and schools are getting rebuilt, and that things seem to be getting back to normal," said the bright-eyed young fundraiser for UNICEF.