

INDIAN OCEAN INSPIRATION

Helen Grant reports on a CPA trip to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, and gives a flavour of the busy programme of meetings and visits undertaken by the cross-party delegation



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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 17

'Necklaces of opals set in turquoise lagoons' – this paradise vision of the Maldivian islands is one I have cherished with my family over the past 20 years but today, sadly, I am no tourist. This particular Sunday is the beginning of a punishing schedule designed to inform our UK Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation of the challenges, opportunities and threats facing our Commonwealth friends, firstly in the Maldives and later in post-war Sri Lanka. I am most grateful to the CPA for this opportunity, but I fear this diary column will merely scratch the surface of what is to come.

We are only in the Maldivian capital island of Male for a few hours, but during that time we are afforded a great insight into the politics and economics of this Indian Ocean Archipelago's 300,000 inhabitants. Following the 12-hour flight we briefly freshen our faces before undertaking a series of meetings with some of the most senior figures in the country, including the highly influential Speaker Abdulla Shahid, the chief justice Ahmed Faiz, opposition party leaders and principal media figures.

For me the highlight of the visit is our meeting with the first democratically elected leader of the Maldives, President Mohamed Nasheed. He is a dynamic and charismatic man clearly on a mission to create a 21st century democracy. A former political prisoner, President Nasheed came to power in 2008 on a reform ticket, but he heads a coalition government which has a minority in the Maldivian parliament, or *Majlis*. Relations with an opposition still coming to terms with loss of power after 30 years in government are a challenge. Our Commonwealth needs to do all it can to encourage the Maldivian coalition and opposition parties to work together and drive through their commitments to human rights, the rule of law and democratic reform, setting aside party differences in the interests of their unique and fabulous country.

We depart for Sri Lanka mid evening and I hoped to catch up with some much-needed sleep – alas, in vain.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 18

My head hardly hits the pillow in our Colombo hotel

when it is rise and shine at 6:30am for a breakfast briefing with the British High Commissioner.

Sri Lanka's 26 years of civil conflict reached a very bloody conclusion in May 2009. Just 18 months later, our delegation had arrived to learn about how the government is overcoming the legacy of destruction, human displacement and social disintegration in this lush and beautiful island of some 20 million people.

We are afforded a long and convivial meeting with the president of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, H.E. Mahinda Rajapaksa, together with several senior ministers including his brother Basil Rajapaksa, minister for economic development. We raise a series of questions relating to humanitarian issues, child soldiers, resettlement of internally displaced people (IDPs), IDP camps and the clearance of land mines. In response the president assures us that he will listen to the views of the people.

This period is clearly a historic window of opportunity for real political settlement and enduring peace. If successful, Sri Lanka will be transformed in just a few years, and the potential for UK investment is immense.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19

Following a cordial meeting with Prime Minister D. M. Jayaratne, we meet some of the large cohort of young new MPs who were elected in the first general election since the end of the war, in April 2010. I am struck by their optimism, energy and dynamism. It is one of the most vibrant meetings of the trip for me and the approach they take will, in my opinion, largely determine the future of Sri Lanka. They will make an important contribution to finding a lasting political solution to the ethnic conflict whilst proudly maintaining the country's impressive traditions as one of the oldest democracies in Asia. I also get a strong feeling that the relationship with Britain is still highly valued.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20

Our party boards a military plane destined for the northern half of the island which bore the heart of the conflict. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE) sought to create an independent state in the north and east of Sri



Lanka known as Tamil Eelam. People lived and worked here under a quasi-administration run by the LTTE. Many people had little choice but to comply and become involved with the regime, and men, women and children were forcibly conscripted into the armed militia to fight the LTTE's cause. After the end of the war many of these people were considered by the government to be ongoing threats and were held in 'rehabilitation centres' where they remain, as we witness on our visit. Whilst detention may well be appropriate for some, there are others whose minor involvement will surely not justify such treatment, and the lack of clarity over their legal status is a source of concern.



Helen Grant with children at a Menik Farm IDP camp, Sri Lanka

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21

After a restful night in the eastern city of Trincomalee and a meeting with members of the local provincial council, we travel north to visit the IDP camps at Menik Farm in the northern province. Until recently these camps housed in excess of 300,000 people, equivalent to the entire population of Coventry, who had fled the final apocalyptic stages of conflict in 2009. The government has made good progress, with 270,000 IDPs having now left the camps. But some 30,000 still remain, awaiting the rebuilding of vital infrastructures and the safe conclusion of a massive land-mine clearance programme. A further key challenge for the government is supporting the resumption of livelihoods once these people do return to their homes, and providing much-needed psychological counselling for the many victims of trauma.

The people we meet had been in the camps for well over 18 months and were bravely maintaining their spirits, happily accompanied by wide-smiling, resilient children hankering to play with joyous persistence. On the way back to Colombo, I reflect upon how long the spirit of these displaced souls can bear up before the dangers of despair and disillusionment might take hold. The government has to ensure that momentum is maintained and that these people are returned as soon as possible. Their needs must not be forgotten or ignored.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 22

The day begins with a visit to the British Council. One of the ways they are helping younger people deal with the trauma of war is through dramatic art and theatre workgroups, giving private anguish a chance to air itself in a controlled environment. The Anglican Bishop of Colombo, the Rt. Revd. Duleep de Chickera, then receives us for my final formal meeting of the visit. He is a very principled man who feels deeply about human rights, justice

and the rule of law. He is working closely with other faith leaders in the island and the Church is certainly playing its part in the peace process.

Progress has certainly been made since May 2009, but considerable challenges remain: freedom of speech, the detention of former combatants outside the legal framework, the return of 30,000 remaining displaced people. Winning a large majority in April 2010, the first post-war government has the popularity and power to make decisive short-term reparations. A strengthening of checks and balances in the exercise of power will be equally important for a longer-term political solution.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 25

Back into the office at Westminster to pull together this diary. Then turn my hand to tackling the mountain of diary appointments that amassed whilst I was away. After that I talk through a number of casework issues with my staff: there's a lot of feedback and thoughts from constituents on the matters outlined in the comprehensive spending review – some happier than others – so it takes a while.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 26

Straight into a morning session of the justice select committee to gather evidence from the lord chief justice, before attending the first meeting to help set up the APPG for women in Parliament. Later, head off to the House of Commons Terrace to hear Michael Gove address the Friends of Grammar Schools reception. There are five of them in my constituency so I'm always keen to keep abreast of their concerns. More voting, and then off to speak in an adjournment debate in the chamber on the provision of maternity services. It's another opportunity for me to fight for the preservation of women's and children's services in Maidstone, which is a campaign I've been fighting for three years now.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 27

Another big push on constituency casework this morning, and then into the chamber for a lively PMQs: somewhat predictably, the spending review dominates. Then off to meet a local Brownie troop from my constituency; they get a tour and have a chat from me about life as an MP. Back to the office for a spot of training and induction with a new member of my staff, and then a catch-up with the rest of the team. 1922 Committee in the evening to hear the defence secretary, Liam Fox, talk about the ramifications of the Strategic Defence and Security Review, before more late-night voting on the future of the Royal Mail. 🏰