



RELIEF AFTER DISASTER IN HUNGARY

From left: Club Budapest member Katalin, Club President Erzsébet and SI/E HQ Programme Executive Suba met with the mayors of the affected villages to discuss the project.

The red toxic sludge spill has left ghost towns in its wake.

Disaster struck Hungary in October 2010, when red toxic sludge from an industrial site destroyed several villages, leaving people homeless, in psychological shock and unsafe. Members of Club Budapest have since been actively working to help the victims and plan to help build a kindergarten.

So far we have raised a significant amount of money from Soroptimist donations – mostly from Europe but also from some US clubs. We are most grateful for this immediate help!

Early January together with SI/E HQ Programme Executive Suba Parthiban, who was in Budapest for a training seminar, Club Budapest President Erzsébet Varsányi and I, as Coordinator for International Goodwill and Understanding, visited the sites of the red toxic spill in Devecser and Kolontár. We also met the two mayors of the villages most affected, Tamás Toldi and Károly Tili.

The mayors' account of the tragedy was deeply moving. Most of the 10 victims of the toxic sludge were elderly. They heard young women saying goodbye to family on mobile phones because they thought they would not survive. They saw old people struggling with infant grandchildren in their arms. 840 people were taken to hospital. Thousands of families, many of whom had lost their homes, were affected during the winter.

The factory in Ajka that caused the disaster directly provides work to some 1,000 people and an existence to their families; in total 6,000 people are affected. Most of these people still want to stay in this region because it is their home. Therefore it is essential to recreate a safe environment for and with them both existentially, as well as emotionally.

Devceser and Kolontár are located in the hills, which is why parts of these villages were totally

wasted when the sludge streamed down, while others remained untouched. The areas affected by the toxic sludge are now completely abandoned. With no more people, animals or plants, they are like ghost towns. The local county council is in the process of providing victims with new houses on an environmentally secure estate. Trees will be planted in the polluted area in order to support the natural revitalisation process.

After evaluating a number of options of how we can focus support on women and children in the revitalisation process, we decided to contribute to building a new kindergarten in Kolontár. One of our club members, who has been running a kindergarten in Budapest for more than 10 years, has the necessary experience. This will enable us to contribute financially, as well as with know-how. Once the facility is functioning, we intend to invite paediatricians, psychologists, dermatologists etc. for weekend meetings with parents to create more awareness about the possible effects of this toxic exposure on children. It is important to prevent and treat any repercussions quickly. Experts will also be invited to workshops for medical physicians to discuss the latest international best practices.

Among others things, we plan to combine our project with actions like giving special Christmas presents, such as educational toys to the children at the kindergarten. Not only will they provide skills, but also bring more joy and health into their lives.

We are very proud to be a part of Soroptimist International, whose members have been so willing to help Hungarian people in need.

Katalin Juhos on behalf of President Erzsébet Varsányi, Club Budapest