

Touched by tragedy

Townsville paediatrician Dr John Whitehall is moved by the plight of the Tamil Tiger community in Sri Lanka and believes they need support, not condemnation. IAN FRAZER reports

A BLIND boy gripped John Whitehall's hand in Sri Lanka 20 months ago and has never really let go.

The boy's faith that Dr Whitehall could guide him home from school has led the Townsville paediatrician on an unexpected journey to newspaper headlines calling him a campaigner for the Tamil Tigers.

This encounter, in a blacked-out deaf-and-blind school run by the Tamil Relief Organisation, helped persuade him to work from September to December 2005 in the Tamil Tiger-controlled Killinochi area of north-east Sri Lanka, and a fortnight ago to argue publicly that the Tigers were not in the same bracket at 'anti-civilisation' forces such as Al Qaeda.

"It touched me," he said this week.

"They had 60 children there — half blind from war injuries — or from birth, the others deaf.

"I went there late one night, to see a little boy who they thought had a tumour on his eye.

"Their generator had broken down and it was in pitch darkness. By torchlight we were standing there and this little kid put his hand in mine, expecting me to take him back to where he lived.

"Another of the blind kids took his hand and the two of them walked off into the pitch darkness."

During three months in Tamil Tiger-controlled districts, Dr Whitehall taught paediatrics to 32 student doctors from the organisation which the Australian government regards as a terrorist group.

He also edited one of the students' memoirs and later wrote two reports for the National Civic Council magazine *News Weekly* — both critical of 'state terrorism' in Sri Lanka and both anonymously.

Dr Whitehall told the *Townsville Bulletin* this week that up to a fortnight ago he had been reluctant to broadcast his views on Sri Lanka, fearing that he might not be allowed to continue his medical work in the country.

But he had changed his mind when a journalist from *The Australian* rang him for his view on the arrests of two Melbourne men for allegedly providing financial and material support to the Tamil Tigers under the guise of raising money for victims of Boxing Day tsunami.

The men were refused bail in Melbourne Magistrates' Court on May 8 and remanded in custody to appear again on July 24.

Dr Whitehall said he had met *The Australian's* reporter Michael McKenna in Sri Lanka in 2005, during a trip to distribute antibiotics and equipment bought with \$175,000 proceeds of the Townsville Sri Lankan Children's Tsunami Appeal.

He decided speaking out would let him counter what he saw as one-sided coverage of the Tigers' ends and means, even if he was barred from re-entering the country.

He hated the headline on May 5: 'Doctor wages PR campaign in aid

of 'separatists', yet the story summarised the nub of his argument: that the Tamil Tigers have a just cause, because of decades of human rights abuses against Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Other parts of the report peeved him too, the description of the Tigers as a mainly Hindu group, rather than a nationalist force for self-determination and the inference that he might have raised money for their 'cause'.

"Though I did teach paediatrics to its medical wing, I have no other association with that organisation" he wrote in a so-far unpublished letter to the editor of *The Australian*.

He agreed to talk to the *Townsville Bulletin*, hoping to clarify his position, and to tell more of the chain of events which led him from co-ordinating the Townsville Sri Lankan Children's Tsunami Appeal to teaching paediatrics to Tamil Tigers in Killinochi.

Dr Whitehall first crossed the military border into the Tamil Tiger-controlled north-east of Sri Lanka in January, 2005, about three weeks after the tsunami which killed 4500 people and left an estimated one million homeless around the island.

He surveyed medical needs and distributed 1644kg of antibiotics.

During the next five months he supervised the distribution of five ventilator machines for sick babies and other equipment to hospitals in all parts of the island, including the north-east.

In the process, he says he saw the effects of the Sri Lankan government's sanctions on Tamil district in the north-east, banning export of rice and restricting sale of petrol and fertilisers — used for bombs as well as agriculture.

"You couldn't help but be surprised by the poverty," he said.

He noticed many thin, malnourished women and children.

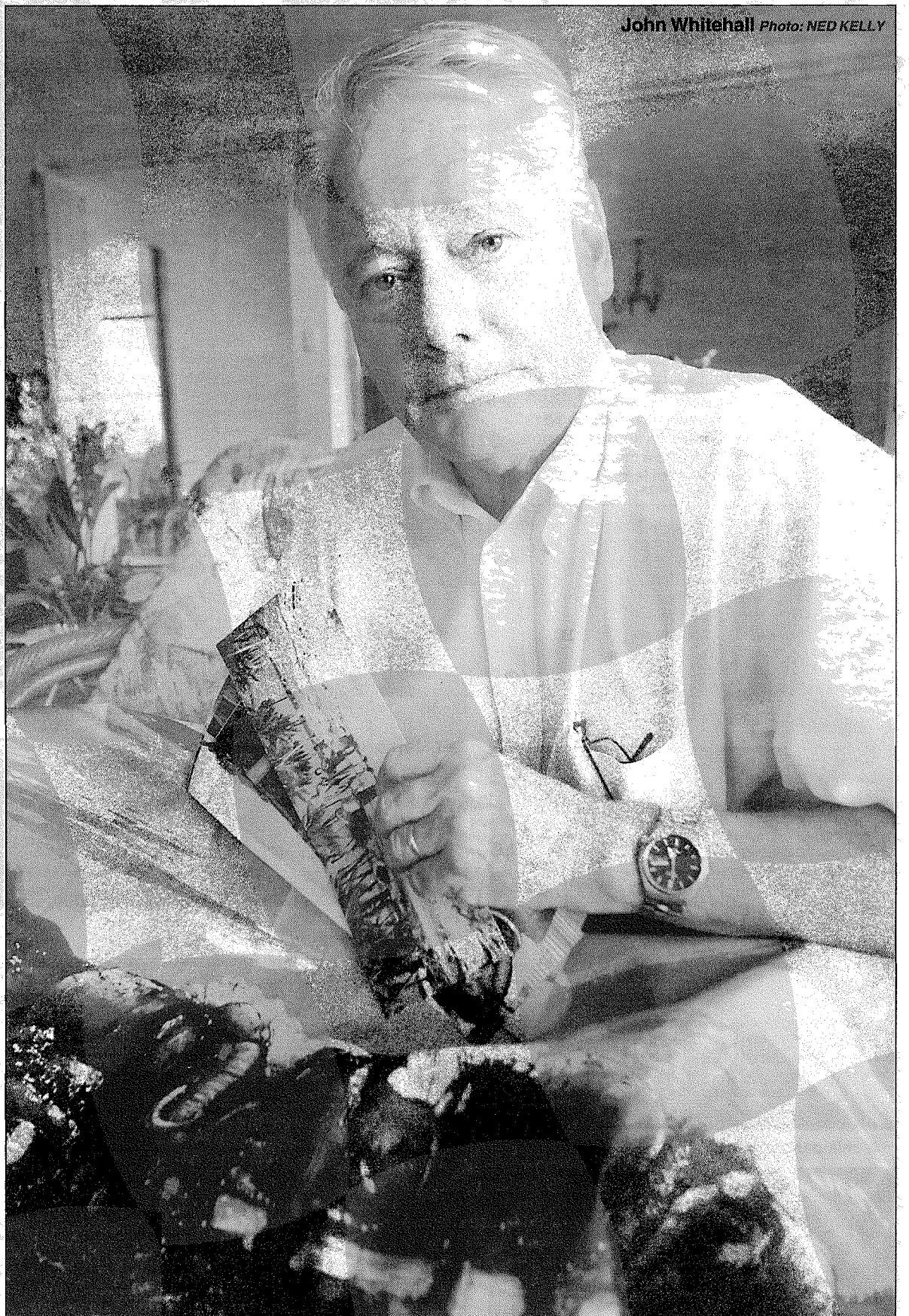
After his return to Townsville, he decided to take some study leave later that year and volunteer to work in the north-east.

He found a British non-government organisation, Childhealth Advocacy International which was looking for a paediatrician for the hospital in the eastern coastal city of Batticaloa in a disputed Tamil district.

Dr Whitehall and his wife, Elsie — a teacher and nurse — visited Batticaloa on their way to their son's wedding in Scotland in September 2005 and had intended to start work there after the wedding.

But on their return, Childhealth Advocacy International asked them to first fill in for a couple of weeks in Killinochi, a Tamil city of about 300,000, hard hit during Sri Lanka's chronic civil war.

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John Whitehall Photo: NED KELLY

The Tamil Relief Organisation Deaf and Blind School with the trusting little boy was not far from Killinochi.

Moved by this experience and the needs they found while helping with medical clinics, the Whitehalls decided to remain in Killinochi.

During the next three months, Dr Whitehall trained and examined 32 student doctors from the medical wing of the Tamil Tigers.

They told him they were the survivors of a group of 75 young men and women who volunteered in 1992 to train in a medical school set up by the Tamil Tigers to run battlefield hospitals.

They had not previously been trained in paediatrics.

Based on his conversations with the students and subsequent research, he believed the Tigers had renounced establishing an independent state but were fighting for regional autonomy in the Tamil country of north-eastern Sri Lanka.

This had been the basis of their truce with the Sri Lankan Government in 2002 — a ceasefire which shattered last year.

The Tigers launched three air raids around the capital, Colombo, in March and April, killing six soldiers and hitting two fuel depots.

Britain announced two weeks ago that it had suspended the

equivalent of \$3 million in debt relief to the Sri Lankan government because of concerns about human rights abuses by its forces in rebel positions.

Dr Whitehall, who worked for non-government organisations in Vietnam, Africa, Lebanon, Mexico and East Timor before taking charge of the Townsville General Hospital Neonatal Unit 12 years ago, wonders if his journeying has been motivated by compassion, or a lust for travel.

"I don't know what fully motivates people, not even myself, but let me tell you this... my whole involvement in Sri Lanka is informed by my Christian faith," he said.

His God of love acknowledged that life was cruel and imperfect and expected people to help each other.

"I like Kevin Rudd's statement that his politics is informed by his Christian belief — I can't get away from it," he said.