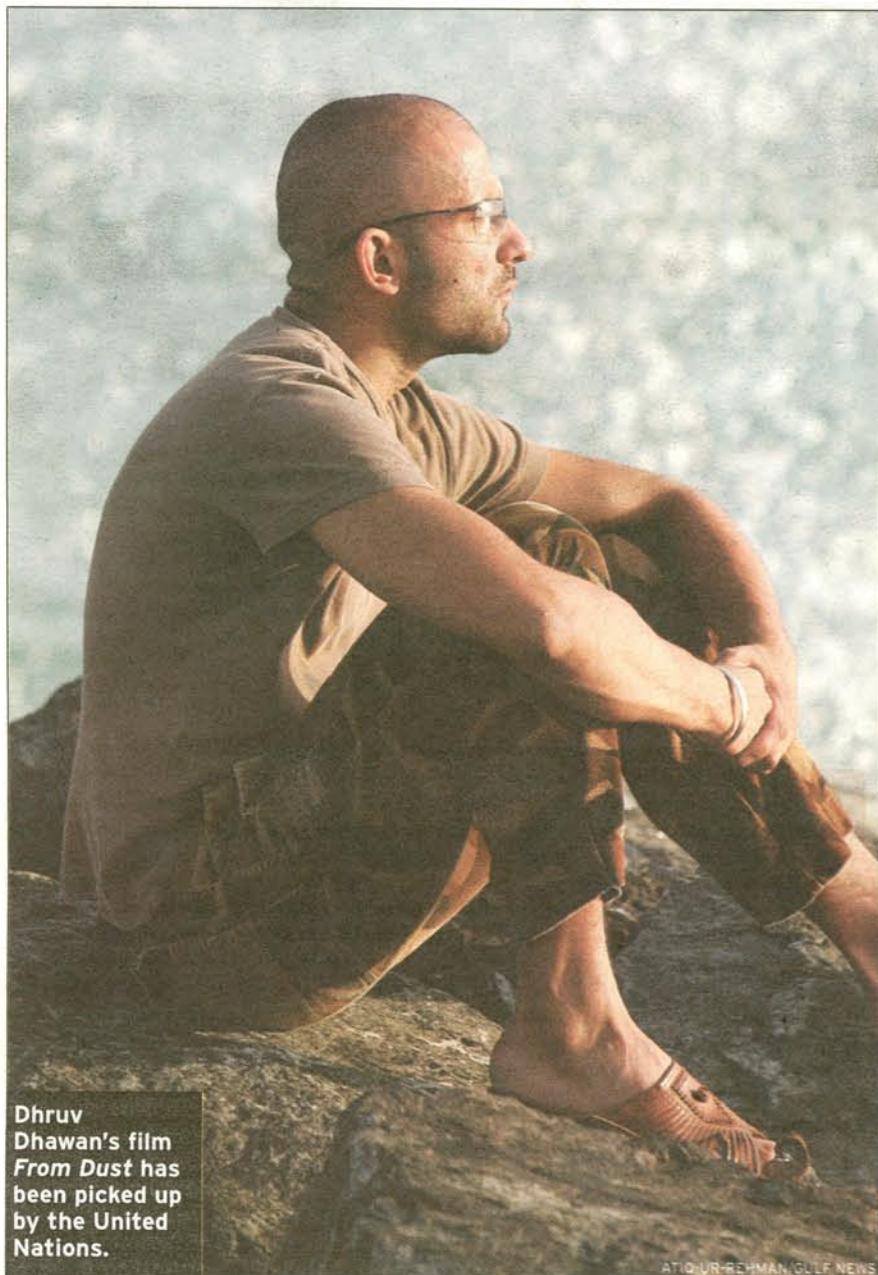


THE RIPPLE EFFECT



Dhruv Dhawan's film *From Dust* has been picked up by the United Nations.

A documentary on the struggle of Sri Lankans trying to return to normality after the 2004 tsunami is making waves across the Atlantic. I-Cheng Chan speaks to director Dhruv Dhawan about his film

Dhruv Dhawan sounds depleted. It has been seven months since his documentary *From Dust* opened to critical acclaim at the Dubai International Film Festival in December.

Since then it has been well received at festivals in New York and Toronto, but what difference has it really made, asks Dhawan.

The majority of the 200,000 fishermen and shopkeepers displaced by the tsunami who used to live along the Sri Lankan coastline are still homeless after the Government imposed a 100-metre buffer zone from the water's edge.

No one has been allowed to rebuild homes within this area and now it seems the cordoned-off prime stretch of land is being offered to the highest bidder in the tourism industry.

HOPE

But a glimmer of hope is on the horizon for the 27-year-old Dubai-based filmmaker who has, until now, felt unable to celebrate the praise and recognition his work has brought him.

The UN has taken interest and wants to screen the 70-minute documentary at its headquarters in the near future.

Dhawan says: "It's the best thing that's happened. Festivals are great but still there are so many people in Sri Lanka who are in a much worse situation than they were the day after the tsunami."

"To me it was very important to promote action at the level of the UN because, ultimately, what can people like you and me do?"

SUSPICION

The documentary maker did not set out to be an activist but wanted to do a story on how people rebuild their lives.

He says: "I was living in New York when the towers went down (9/11) and I never did anything there so, when the tsunami happened, I felt compelled to go there and try to understand what the people were going through."

"It was in May 2005 that my suspicion of this (buffer zone) law came through when we started to see hotels being built on land that once belonged to tsunami survivors."

For Dhawan, this proved that greed and bureaucracy were stronger than humanity. "It's all well and good if you can create jobs and boost the economy but, in this case, these were people who had already suffered a mass tragedy and to make them suffer further, it just outraged me."

MAMMOTH TASK

The proceeds from the documentary so far have enabled Dhawan to donate enough to build one home. But he knows his financial contribution is a drop in the ocean considering the mammoth task ahead.

Dhawan says: "I want to let people know what really happens in the aftermath of these disasters. With people like the UN screening it, I hope it provokes awareness."

"You have to ask the Sri Lankan Government, what has happened to all the aid and why are they preventing their people from rebuilding, rather than helping them?"

THE DIRECTOR

Dhruv Dhawan is originally from Shimla, in north India, but grew up in Dubai.

His interest in documentary making led him to study cultural anthropology with a focus on visual ethnography at Duke University in North Carolina, America.

He went on to do a post-graduate at the New York Film Academy before working in documentary and commercial film production in New York.

After returning to Dubai, Dhawan focused his efforts on directing commercial films for Dubai Media City, Dubai International Film Festival and Damas to name but a few.

From Dust is Dhawan's first feature-length documentary, which he created during 10 months in Sri Lanka following the tsunami.

The film is being distributed internationally and is due to be released on DVD.



Fisherman have been unable to return to their land after the disaster.

SANKHA KAR/GULF NEWS



FACTS FROM THE FILM

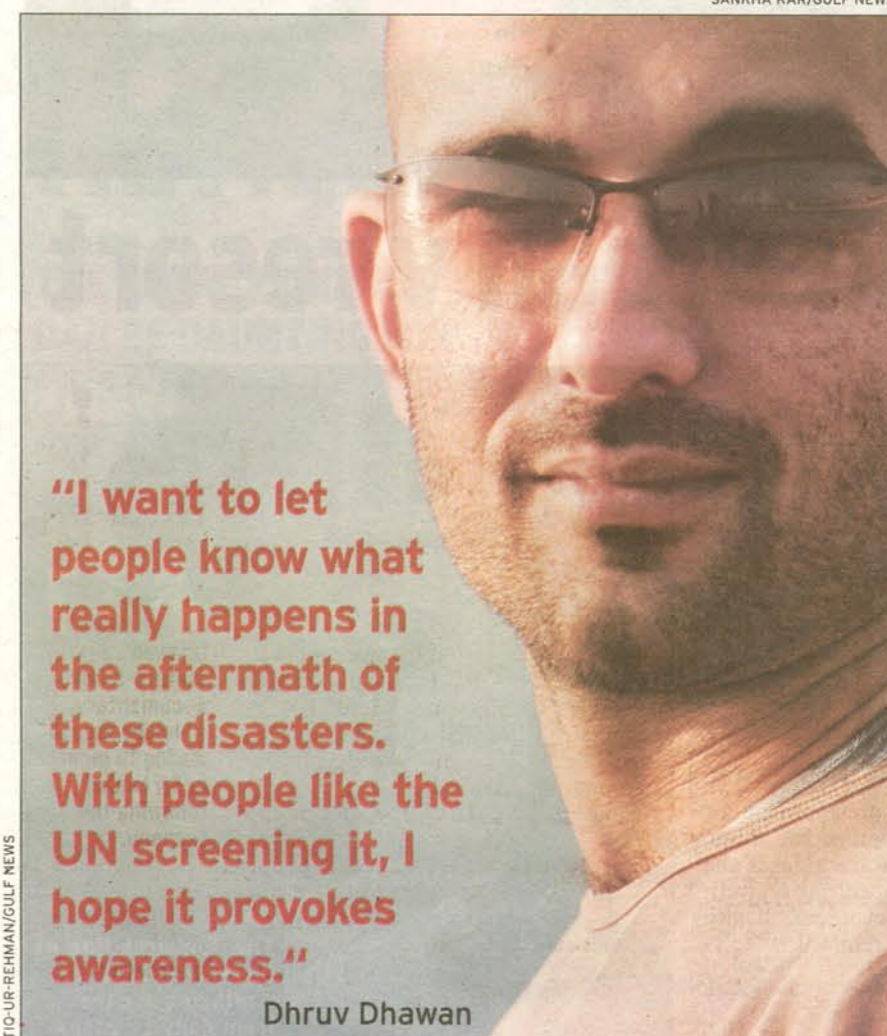
It is estimated that around \$1 billion (Dh3.67 billion) in aid has been received by Sri Lanka since the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004.

The price of cement and building materials increased by 350 per cent in Sri Lanka between January and May 2005.

US Navy servicemen sent to Sri Lanka with money and materials to rebuild homes left many months later without rebuilding a single one.

A mass grave following the tsunami at Point Pedru in Sri Lanka.

SANKHA KAR/GULF NEWS



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