

India's 'Hugging Saint' to Donate \$22M

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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COCHIN, India (AP) -- An Indian religious leader known as "the hugging saint" -- because she uses hugs as a gesture of blessing -- pledged \$22 million Monday to help survivors of last month's devastating tsunami.

Money donated by Mata Amritanandamayi will be used to build homes for tsunami victims in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. Amritanandamayi's native village of Parayakadavu in Kerala was among those hit by the Dec. 26 disaster, which killed more than 139,000 people in Asia and Africa.

Amritanandamayi -- known by her followers as "Amma," which means "mother" in several Indian languages -- has devotees throughout India and in the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia. Followers say she has given 30 million hugs in 30 years. She travels much of the year, meeting people from other cultures and religions.

"Amma is moved and anguished by the colossal tragedy," said Amrita Swaroopananda, a spokesman for Amritanandamayi.

The Amritanandamayi Charitable Trust has centers in 15 countries, including Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Britain. It builds homes, runs schools and provides medical care for poor people in India.