

Background and Context

On the morning of Boxing Day, an earthquake measuring 9.3 on the Richter scale occurred off the coast of north-west Sumatra in Indonesia. The earthquake triggered a tsunami (a large sea wave) that struck the coasts of thirteen countries, causing great devastation and loss of life. Countries all around the Indian Ocean rim were affected, from Thailand to Somalia and from Indonesia to the coast of India.



The waves killed some 300,000 people, and left millions more without food, homes and livelihoods. In Thailand and Sri Lanka in particular, thousands of foreign nationals were affected, expanding the impact of the tragedy to many other countries far away from the disaster stricken regions. The implications for those affected extend far beyond the immediate period of aftermath, to the following months and years.

The disaster struck during a peak holiday season. It is thought that approximately 10,000 British nationals were in the affected region when the tsunami struck. As at the end of September 2006, there were 150 confirmed British dead and one highly likely to have died, giving a total of 151. Three of these were in the Maldives, 17 in Sri Lanka and 131, including the one unconfirmed and ten dual nationals, in Thailand. The number injured is not known.

How the Topic was Handled

It was agreed that, as the UK victims' bodies would be brought into the UK via Heathrow, the West London coroner (Coroner for Hammersmith and Fulham) should assume jurisdiction as she would be the coroner who would deal with the bodies on their return and hold inquests. Given that body identification would be difficult, she went on a fact-finding visit to the Far East. When the bodies returned to Heathrow, they were taken to the West London mortuary at Fulham for examination. Inquests were held at Olympia in December 2005.

The London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham were reimbursed for the additional costs it faced as a result of the work undertaken by the Coroner's Service in response to the Asian Tsunami.

Lessons Identified

None provided

Contacts for Further Information

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