

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

When loved ones were confirmed as having died, the sheer number of tasks and negotiations that the bereaved families had to engage in was overwhelming. Many painful decisions had to be taken quickly, such as whether to transport a loved one's body home or whether to have the cremation take place in the affected country. The sensitivity, or otherwise, of the agencies people were in contact with had a significant impact on how bearable the process was.

For those who discovered very quickly that their loved ones had died, it was important to understand the procedures quickly, so that decisions could be taken about bringing them home.

The repatriation of loved ones' bodies took place over many weeks and months. It did not affect all families who lost loved ones, since some lived overseas and others decided to cremate in the affected areas. Where repatriation to the UK took place, less than one in five families who lost someone was able to meet the plane. Over fifty per cent were not able to acknowledge the coffin or have their loved one's possessions returned to them. Bereaved families wanted these options.

People talked about their desire to have been able to meet the plane and were upset when they saw the sensitive ceremony that other countries had organised regarding repatriation (notably Sweden). There appeared to be an inflexible approach to this issue and some practical arrangements were clearly not thought through sensitively.

Other issues raised were that coffins were sealed before families had been asked whether they wished to see the body of their loved one or, for instance, for a lock of hair to be removed. Some also wanted more information about how and where the body had been found.

The bereaved also talked about the symbolic value of personal items such as rings. Often these items represented the last treasured memory of their loved ones and the inability to retrieve these, or the significant delays and negotiations involved, were highly distressing. When the items were returned this was usually done with great care.

Some practical issues were raised relating to poor communication or mistakes being made.

Those involved in the identification process were particularly praised.

Five UK citizens are yet to be identified, (in four cases the fact of death was certified but the body was not yet identified, and one was still missing). Although family members have accepted that their loved ones probably never will be identified, the desire to be kept informed about what happens next was expressed.

Family Liaison Officers continued to have a role with families and survivors after the loved one had been confirmed as having died. In most cases, this support was considered very significant. However, difficulties were experienced by extended families where more than one FLO was involved. And, in a number of families, painful issues were raised about relationships between family members when dealing with matters about a loved one who had died. The narrow definition of next of kin exacerbated this situation. In a few cases, Family Liaison Officers became aware of issues from one side of the family and were described as becoming involved in a judgemental and unhelpful way. Differences in the timing and quality of information that was accessed by different Family Liaison Officers added to the potential difficulties.

The first bodies to be repatriated arrived back in UK on 31 January 2005. The last body positively identified was flown home on 7 February 2005. The Coroner's Inquest held for 93 dead began on 12 December 2005.

Agencies Involved and Roles and Responsibilities

The agencies involved included:

- Government departments and UK embassies abroad, see below.
- Police Forces, UK wide.
- British Red Cross, UK and overseas.
- Coroners, undertakers, etc.

Their roles and responsibilities were:

- **Police:** The Metropolitan Police provided a back-up call handling service in the UK at its London Casualty Bureau. Police forces around the UK continue to provide Family Liaison Officers, to gather forensic evidence to support victim identification and also provide general support to the bereaved. Other officers were deployed to support victim identification in the affected areas.
- **British Red Cross:** Continues to provide relief to people in crisis both in the UK and overseas. Operated a telephone support line, with other specialist and voluntary organisations, for those affected from 1 January 2005, and deployed a psycho-social support team to Thailand from 3 January 2005. BRC deployed volunteers to meet incoming returnees at Heathrow and Gatwick. With initial Government funding, the BRC set up the Tsunami Support Network for UK Nationals who were affected. Established the Tsunami Hardship Fund in November 2005.
- **Coroners:** The coronership responded to and investigated those deaths which had been referred to it. Namely, the 93 deceased tsunami victims repatriated to the UK.
- **Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London:** Lead Department for the government's response to the crisis.
- **DCMS Humanitarian Assistance Unit (DCMS HAU), London:** Since March 2005, the principal point of contact within government for those directly affected by the tsunami.
- **Department of Health and National Health Service, London:** Provided health care services for those affected.
- **Cabinet Office, London:** Co-ordinated liaison between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other government departments, where a joined-up response was vital in dealing with the crisis.
- **Department for Work and Pensions, London:** Dealt with the cancellation of benefits, pensions etc. of those who had died, provided Bereavement Benefit to eligible next of kin, and gave benefits and pensions advice where appropriate.

Lessons Identified

- Repatriation of loved ones' remains is a highly sensitive matter in which individual preferences vary.

Staff need to follow the standard guidance that the wishes of the relatives should prevail wherever possible. For example, possessions should be gathered before caskets are sealed.

- Though there are Security and Health and Safety reasons why it is difficult to allow relatives into airside areas of Heathrow and Gatwick airports to receive caskets, the report indicates that this can be an important unmet need.

The police and airport authorities should consider ways that would enable relatives to meet the casket off the plane, as was observed in other countries. If this is not feasible at major airports, then depending on the circumstances of each crisis, the UK authorities may wish to consider use of alternative points of entry to the UK.

- Survivors report being overwhelmed by the number of administrative tasks associated with the consequences of a sudden death or serious injury abroad.

The FCO should complete and issue the guidance they are developing, making this easily accessible to all those affected and to FLOs.

- While the media was recognised for its beneficial role in advertising missing people and giving a voice to peoples' own accounts, the majority of survivors were negative.

Clear guidance needs to be made available to those affected, and their loved-ones at home, to help in coping with media intrusion where this is unwelcome. This should include their rights under the Press Complaints Commission code of conduct of August 2006.

- Survivors reported negative feedback about banks, financial institutions and utility companies in their treatment of people following bereavement. The best companies recognised in the initial contact that the context was extraordinary, and allocated suitably experienced staff to deal with all related matters.

The private sector should learn from those companies which recognised the special needs of people bereaved in the tsunami, by moderating their normal procedures and information requirements.

- It is clearly very important to the bereaved that those in the affected areas appreciate the importance of loved ones' possessions, and that any possessions found should be kept safe and returned if at all possible.

Where families are required to give personal effects to assist identification, care must be taken to explain that they will be returned, but although all attempts will be made to safeguard the effects, they may be damaged during the process.

In the case of relatives of the dead or seriously injured, FLOs, (or the DCMS HAU) should interpret the term 'family group' in its

broadest sense, collecting details of key points of contact within each family, to ensure that all relevant people are kept informed.

- Effective supervision needs to be in place for FLOs in particular those working with complex extended families.
- When disasters involving British nationals occur overseas, UK local authorities do not have a specific statutory duty to respond. Respondents to the survey reported very little involvement with local authority services to meet their non-medical needs, and a feeling of isolation.

The DCMS HAU should strengthen links with local authorities to enhance local support to deal with the non-medical consequences of the disaster such as bereavement services, housing and education issues, social services etc.

- The review findings indicate that those without a FLO – the vast majority of people – need someone advocating on their behalf.

This is a real opportunity to address this significant gap. There is a particular need for agencies or groups to take responsibility for tracking and supporting people who do not have an FLO.

- Bereaved respondents reported being inundated with administrative forms at this particularly difficult time.

Hardship Funds, including those administered by the voluntary sector, need straightforward and stable criteria for eligibility if valid applications for assistance are not to be deterred.

Contacts for Further Information

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

King Charles Street, London, SW1A 2AH

Tel: 020 7008 1500

National Audit Office

157-197 Buckingham Palace Road, London, SW1W 9SP

Tel: 020 7798 7000

Department for Culture Media & Sport – Humanitarian Assistance Unit

2-4 Cockspur Street, London, SW1Y 5DH

Tel: 020 7211 6200

Cabinet Office

70 Whitehall, London, SW1A 2AS

Tel: 020 7276 1234

Central Casualty Bureau

Metropolitan Police Service, New Scotland Yard, Broadway, London, SW1H 0BG

Tel: 020 7230 1212

Ministry of Justice

Selborne House, 54 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QW.

Tel: 020 7210 8500

Additional Documents

Primary References

- National Audit Office / Foreign & Commonwealth Office
Joint findings on lessons to be learned from the handling of the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami[\[External website\]](#).
- National Audit Office / Zito Trust
Review of the experiences of United Kingdom nationals affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami.[\[External website\]](#)

Secondary References

- **Tsunami Support Network** [\[External website\]](#)
- **Guardian Newspaper Report** [\[External website\]](#)
- **British Red Cross Society** [\[External website\]](#)
- **Ministry of Justice** [\[External website\]](#)