

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

Experiences were very varied; from those who made their own arrangements, without contacting any UK agencies, to those whose circumstances meant that they needed a lot of help.

A central difficulty for all was in finding out what flights were available and which were appropriate for the injured. There appeared to be no single contact point where this information could be accessed. As a result, people relied on word of mouth. A number of other countries placed large advertisements in local newspapers giving embassy contact details for

survivors and details of imminent flights, but the UK adverts were not seen by many British survivors.

People who were in a fit state to travel described the difficulties they experienced in trying to get home: from trying to find out what flights were available, to practical issues such as having no money or passports. Some helped in the aftermath; others moved inland and took their scheduled flights home. It is not known how many people made their own way home without contacting UK agencies prior to departure, but it is likely to be a large proportion of those who were less severely affected.

For those who were injured or whose loved ones had died or were missing, the process was much more complex and many British nationals relied on help from UK organisations, in particular, the UK Embassy in the affected country and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the UK.

One family reported that a UK flight was refused to them because the surviving partner was not British, in spite of the presence of children. This seemingly rigid approach created great distress and they relied on government representatives from other countries who were persuaded to offer alternative flights.

This was not an experience limited to flights out of the area. Similar difficulties were encountered by those people in mixed nationality partnerships, or families trying to register and search for missing loved ones.

Another factor that made the decision to return home especially difficult was where a loved one was still missing, or was known to have died. A number of families talked about their feelings of guilt and sorrow at having to return home without their loved ones.

Comments were made on the lack of UK officials in the airports and how getting home seemed to depend on: survivors' resourcefulness; having someone to advocate on an individual's behalf, or making a scene.

There were some examples of the local airport staff providing good facilities but the media presence at airports in the affected areas was intrusive. The experience of the flight itself was again very variable. While some were upgraded and cared for well, others were left with insufficient clothing and food, and no access to facilities.

More than fifty per cent of returning survivors were met by family and friends at the airport in the UK and were offered support by the police. One in three was not offered any support at all. Many people returned to the UK via Heathrow and Gatwick. The arrangements that had been put in place varied, depending on when people travelled. Some survivors arrived in the UK within 24 hours, others up to six weeks later, due to injuries. Some people described how difficult it was when there was no recognition of what they had experienced.

When disembarking, survivors could choose one of two routes through the airport, via the ordinary exit, where the Red Cross Team were waiting, in addition to the media, or via an alternative route where they could meet

relatives in private and leave the airport, often to be transferred to hospital, by a separate exit. For those who experienced this process, the feedback was that it was well thought-through and well-managed.

A disadvantage of choosing the private route (which applied to all severely injured people) was that they did not receive any information about access to psychological help. Although people described clearly that they were in crisis, but not in any position to engage in counselling at that stage, they did feel that being introduced to someone who would visit them later, or receiving basic information and contact details relating to the likely impact of trauma, might have been helpful.

The arrival of survivors back into the UK was the most obvious point at which to collect contact details, in order to have a record of those affected and for potential future service contacts. A recurring theme to emerge from the qualitative data was the experience of having to provide personal details at many different stages, including on the plane or at the airport, but that people did not know what happened to these details. Respondents assumed that other relevant agencies would be passed their details and they would therefore not be required to supply them over and over again to seemingly no purpose.

This is a central issue as no comprehensive and accessible record of those affected was compiled. The information was scattered among different agencies and, due to concerns over data protection legislation, the sharing of important details was not the norm. This has had many consequences, for instance; problems relating to invitation to events and official communication regarding support packages and access to potential services.

Agencies Involved and their Roles

The agencies involved were:

- Government departments and UK embassies abroad (see below)
- Police Forces, UK wide
- British Red Cross, UK and overseas

The roles of the various organisations 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:** Provided relief to people in crisis both in the UK and overseas. Operated a telephone support line, with other organisations, for those affected from 1 January 2005, and deployed a psycho-social support team to Thailand from 3 January 2005. BRCS deployed volunteers to meet incoming returnees at Heathrow and Gatwick. With initial Government funding, they established the Tsunami Support Network for UK Nationals who

were affected. Established the Tsunami Hardship Fund in November 2005.

- **Foreign and Commonwealth Office**, London. Lead Department for the government's response to the crisis.
- DCMS Humanitarian Assistance Unit, 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

The key lessons identified were:

- Almost all survivors left the area through their own efforts or with the help of travel companies or airlines. Survey respondents reported difficulties in finding out what official flights were available and which were appropriate for the injured.
The Foreign and Commonwealth Office needs clear guidance to consular staff on how best, and where, to advertise any evacuations, using a range of media. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office needs clear criteria, used to decide which groups of those affected would have first priority on evacuation flights or voyages, with flexibility allowed to officials to apply criteria compassionately.
Those who have severe or life threatening injury, and children in the affected areas whose parents who are missing, or are known to have died, should be visited as soon as possible by an official, and prioritised for outgoing flights, in line with Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated policy. Assistance should be given to a relative or close friend to fly out to join unaccompanied children.
- Difficulties were reported in gaining flights for mixed nationality families and partnerships.
FCO should ensure that its stated policy to assist all members of mixed nationality families is upheld, and that people caught up in disaster situations should be treated as a UK couple, irrespective of whether the UK partner had died, subject to complying with immigration law.
- Airlines need to consider that evacuees may be destitute and in acute need of food, blankets, and an aisle seat if injured.
- Survivors who experienced the reception process at Heathrow Airport felt that it was well thought-through and well-managed. The arrangements provide a helpful basis for planning the response for future emergencies.

- A third of survivors did not report having received offers of support.
There seems from this to be scope to improve the consistency of arrangements or at least the basic briefing of ground staff at airports where reception teams are not going to be in place.
- The one UK government flight back to the UK from Thailand returned mostly empty: survivors expressed strong disappointment that they had been uninformed about it.
There should be a single point of contact in the affected area for use by survivors and officials on the ground, to provide information on the availability and booking of any UK government flights out of the area. The single point of contact should aim to give reasonable notice in excess of travel time to the airport. Those in the UK arranging evacuation flights should support this service standard by sending timely advance notice of outgoing flights.
The Flights Point of Contact in affected areas should use a wide range of local media to publicise flights in sufficient time, and should work through lists of those registered for flights until flights are as full as possible.
Arrangements need to be in place to ensure that on departure from the affected area, details are sent to the UK of the medical and other needs of those on flights, to ensure effective and sympathetic reception on arrival in the UK. The travel operators, airlines and other government agencies have a key role to play in this, in co-operation with FCO staff at the outgoing airport.
- An opportunity was lost to collect complete lists of those directly exposed to the disaster at their point of return to the UK.
Arrangements need to be in place to capture contact details for returnees at incoming ports or airports, as a basis for subsequent aftercare.
- DCMS should work with other agencies to ensure arrangements are in place to provide basic information explaining access to future support, including the role of the DCMS Humanitarian Assistance Unit as a "Gateway" to aftercare, and written information about common emotional reactions to disasters. This may be most effective when placed at UK entry points.
- When disasters involving British nationals occur overseas, UK local authorities do not have a specific statutory duty to respond.
Survivors and bereaved families 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.

Contacts for Further Information

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Department for Culture Media & Sport – Humanitarian Assistance Unit

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Cabinet Office

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Central Casualty Bureau

Metropolitan Police Service,
New Scotland Yard,
Broadway,
London,
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Tel: 020 7230 1212

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]