

Tsunami : The Phuket Experience

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The Indian Ocean (Asian) Tsunami occurred on 26 December 2004, a day after Christmas, when most people were holidaying and relaxing. It was to become an international disaster.

The news trickled in – destruction caused by strong waves in Sri Lanka, then India. News of a huge earthquake in Indonesia followed. All of this seemed distant and disconnected until it was linked together, as destructive tsunami waves from a powerful Indonesian earthquake swept through the shores of Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and other countries. The destruction to our nearest neighbors, Thailand and Malaysia, with familiar names like Phuket and Penang then made it real, and too close to home.

The world soon awakened to the severity of the disaster through the continuous news coverage on television and radio, of extensive damage, and loss of lives. The images of terrible destruction and grieving people were projected repeatedly, haunting the collective consciousness. Singaporeans were shocked and disturbed.

Then followed news of Singaporeans being lost in Phuket, as well as other nearby beach resorts. As a medical doctor and a psychiatrist trained as an emergency behavioral officer (EBO), I was ready to be activated.

As more Singaporeans were lost or missing in that area, the first team of 6 EBOs was sent to Phuket. This team consisted of 5 psychologists and 1 psychiatrist. Its main role was to set up a station, to offer psychological assistance and advice. There were representatives from the different ministries of 30 countries concentrated in the City Hall. The Singaporean Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly set

up a contact centre for Singaporeans; this was later shifted to the Phuket Church. The first team of EBOs was quickly assigned to each next-of-kin who came to search for their missing loved ones. EBOs accompanied the worried relatives to the disaster sites, hospitals and different temporary mortuaries. Their main role was to take care of the basic needs of the relatives, but they were also on hand to manage any psychological crises that developed.

By the end of the first week, most of the relatives had returned to Singapore. Having seen the amount of damage at the disaster sites, some realized that the chance of survival was small. Visits to the mortuaries, where thousands of crushed and decomposing bodies were kept, also allowed them to realize the difficulty of identifying the remains. However, anger and denial of acute grief, normal at this early stage, was still prominent in most relatives. Many found it extremely difficult to accept the loss of loved ones without any clear evidence.

I led the second team with a prison psychologist, to take over from the outgoing team, as it was agreed that each team should stay no longer than one week, due to the demands the work entailed. We had to define our new role there – which was to focus on psychological debrief for the frontline rescuers, as well as to accompany any relatives who had returned to Phuket. The frontline rescuers were mainly the 80 Singapore Civil Defence Force personnel, who had to search and recover dead bodies from the disaster sites; as well as the police officers involved in the identification of dead bodies with the forensic team in the mortuary. We worked closely with the staff from Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) who were coordinating the contact centre, and with

the Ministry of Information, Communication and Arts (MICA) in terms of news release. At the same time, we were also maintaining the psychological well being of the rest of the staff at the contact centre.

In Singapore, the first tranche of EBOs followed up with calls to the relatives. A few families requested arrangements for religious rites; others were making requests to carry out further searches, in fact some of which were based on dreams. Nevertheless, all requests were communicated through us to the committee everyday, and they were fulfilled out as far as possible. The results were communicated through the EBOs back to the relatives.

It became more difficult when the search and rescue forces began to withdraw. We anticipated such news to be disturbing to the relatives, who were still hopeful, particularly when news emerged of isolated survivors, who were rescued after more than a week. However, the EBOs and the official staff informed each relative personally before the Minister of Home Affairs made the official announcement. Some relatives actually accepted this news as a form of closure; others were upset and made further requests for coastal and hospital searches, whilst others continued on their own, using local agencies. It was psychologically tedious for everyone from next-of-kin and MFA to the rescue staff, and especially for the EBOs. We had to contain the emotions of grieving relatives as well as the staff at the operation centre, and to convey difficult operational decisions and mostly negative search findings to the relatives, as well as convey further requests back to the officials.

My team visited the disaster sites and the main mortuary at Wat Yanyao, in order to understand the environment and circumstances under which our front rescuers were working. It was to be an extraordinary learning experience for us as well.

I was shocked by the extent of the destruction by the tsunami waves. Resorts along the beaches were

obviously torn away from their foundations. I could only imagine the incessant huge waves, armed with rocks and mud that crushed and swept away the helpless victims. The rooms on the lower floors of hotels still standing were all destroyed; the higher floors and trees which survived the waves gave us an idea of the height of the powerful waves. The extent of the destruction inland was tremendous. In some areas, we saw huge boats lodged at least 700 m inland in densely populated shopping districts, which themselves were largely destroyed. From what we saw, we could then relate to the Civil Defense Force personnel, who described their own search and rescue experience during the psychological debrief sessions.

The experience at the mortuary (Wat Yanyao) was incredible, and memorable, to say the least. The smell from the thousands of highly decomposed bodies was overwhelming. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) police officer oriented us through the mortuary, going through careful decontamination steps before and after the visit, as well as mentally preparing us for the sight of numerous dead bodies. We observed the forensic teams carrying out their post-mortem identification procedures. The sight of the highly decomposed bodies was quite disturbing, as most of them were beyond recognition. It was especially difficult to look at the remains of dead children. We could then understand the stress frontline rescuers underwent on a daily basis, working through the day in such an upsetting and stressful environment. The forensic team told us they were very upset because the rampant looting of the dead bodies soon after the disaster deprived the victims of items to identify them. Some postulate that it might take months, or even years, before a relative can finally receive an identified body for proper burial and closure.

The psychological debrief with the SCDF was carried out over 2 days, during the period when the rescue operation was winding down. We took groups

of 8 personnel for debrief sessions, each lasting an hour. The main aim was to allow them to process the whole experience. Most rescuers had to isolate their emotions during the mission to effectively function as professionals, and would likely be required to do so again after return to Singapore, in order to quickly return to their normal lives. It was therefore most important to surface suppressed emotions after this incredible experience, and to process them during the sessions.

The two most common emotions reported by the personnel were the excitement they felt in anticipation of rescuing survivors, and the disappointment that no rescues were effected. This was soon sublimated into strong hopes of recovering dead bodies. Some staff overworked themselves and almost suffered heat exhaustion; some received cuts as a result of overlooking the dangers of broken glass and nails scattered everywhere. Many were initially excited by the smell of decomposing bodies, hoping that that feature would lead to the discovery of buried bodies; others were disappointed at the end of a dig to find only dead animals. The sight of children's items left in the rooms, and especially the corpses of children, disturbed no small numbers. They were advised by their officers not to look directly at the faces of the corpses, as most victims had lost their eyeballs, a sight that would prove

difficult to forget. Some staff reflected that it was the missing person's pictures pasted everywhere with a smiling face that haunted them rather than the dead bodies. However, the morale of the civil defence people remained very high, as they were well prepared before they arrived. Most importantly, we were heartened by the excellent leadership, mentorship, team spirit and camaraderie amongst the rescuers.

We learned so much from them during the sessions, in particular the ways to comb a large area for possible buried bodies. They described the distinct sweet smell of decomposed human bodies that was different from that of animals and fish. We later recognized this difference when we visited the mortuary.

The locals were very helpful; they provided food, water, and shelter for our Civil Defense personnel. This boosted the morale of the staff immensely. In fact, the majority of the local Thais we met were positive and resilient. They were keen to resume life. One main concern for them was about tourism returning to Phuket, and for people to start consuming fish as their livelihood depended on it.

As most of us have learned from this life-changing experience, Singapore is a truly safe and clean place to live in. We should all treasure our lives and our loved ones all the more.