

Thailand's tsunami: disaster management lessons for Australia

Mr Bill Paterson PSM, Australian Ambassador to Thailand reports on the Asian Tsunami

The 26 December tsunami across wide areas of the Indian Ocean presented new and unexpected challenges in disaster management and the response to mass casualty incidents.

It occurred in an area not prone to seismic events of this magnitude; it was not a flood, a cyclone, a bushfire, a volcanic eruption, a pandemic or a famine. It was not brought about by civil strife, war or unexpected violence, nor by an aircraft crash or train accident. There was no advance warning and no systems in place in regional countries to communicate one. Seismology, meteorology or intelligence were unable to predict the event.

Some of that is almost by definition true of many mass casualty incidents, for if we knew they were coming we would take steps to mitigate their effect or to prevent them, and prepare to respond. It was true of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Bali bombings. It is true of any number of unanticipated events – and it is the job of emergency management professionals to set in place the skills and capacity to deal with them.

But it is relatively new for us, as foreign service professionals, to be closely involved in disaster consequence management on a fairly regular basis, and to have to factor this in to our planning as an integral part of our work and our skill set. In Canberra, our crisis centre was activated five times in 2005 and is again in operation over East Timor. We deployed emergency response teams overseas four times last year.

Why? For two broad reasons. Over one million Australians travel overseas or live overseas in any year. Almost inevitably, if there is a major disaster anywhere around the globe, Australians will have been affected. They will need support and assistance in coping with situations that go beyond those where we might reasonably expect individuals to cope on their own.

And secondly, but equally important, people in many countries important to us may have been affected, and our humanitarian impulses – as well as our national interests – demand a supportive response.

For Australians, the Indian Ocean tsunami invoked both these factors. It was largely a foreign event, although I understand the waves were measurable here in Western Australia. Unlike many incidents, it was

also a multinational event, affecting a number of Indian Ocean littoral countries. It was largely a coastal event, with a disproportionate impact on two population groups: fishing settlements and foreign tourists. And, as seems so often the way, it caught us and others during a holiday period, when police, defence, emergency services and our own foreign service personnel were operating at minimum staffing levels.

I want to explain a little of what we did, largely in Thailand for that was my direct experience, in responding, and to draw out some lessons from that which I hope may serve to further refine our contingency planning. But the first, perhaps obvious, lesson is this: that no two disasters are the same – they occur in different locations, in different geography, with widely differing infrastructure and access, different local capabilities, in different weather conditions. Religion, foreign language and local customs may also be relevant. War or peace can make a big difference. As does a natural event compared with a criminal act, such as a terrorist incident. In the latter, the scene is also a crime zone, with a need to preserve forensic evidence and to ensure those who respond do not themselves become targets.

So the lesson is that contingency planning needs to encompass multiple scenarios and indeed completely unforeseen situations, and flexibility must be the by-word of any response. And it has to be said, we were lucky indeed, if I may use that word in describing a highly distressing situation, that we had to operate in southern Thailand.

We firstly were operating in a capable and welcoming environment, used to foreigners and where English was often understood. Secondly, infrastructure was overall good: Phuket airport, where the runway and aprons were initially flooded by the tsunami, was returned to service within hours and was capable of sustaining a high level of air movements, from 747s to helicopter operations. Another airport at Krabi, although smaller, was similarly capable. The road system was very good, and useable except for coastal strips affected by the waves. Earthmoving and other debris removal equipment was in good supply and quickly made available. Phuket has excellent hospitals which quickly moved into emergency mode. Power disruptions were quickly rectified. Many large tourist hotels were little damaged, and hence could support emergency

crews arriving from around the world. A capable and supportive private sector in Thailand donated large quantities of bottled water and food, vehicles and other supplies and got it there quickly.

At the command and administration level, police and military units were available to both ensure law and order and to support some rescue operations and to distribute relief supplies. The Thai government quickly established a coordination centre at the Phuket provincial government headquarters and dispatched the Interior Minister – with wide authority – to lead its response.

In some disaster situations, almost none of these positive factors might be present.

Set against these positive factors, was the sheer scale of the disaster – spread over some hundreds of kilometres of populated coastline – and the fact that it hit two very different sets of people. It came at the peak of Thailand's tourist season, with hotels full in particular of Europeans escaping the northern winter. Concerned relatives all around the world often had no idea where in Thailand their parents or children were – and this resulted in the overloading of the mobile phone system. Cellular networks can be a huge aid to disaster management – but as in New York on 9/11 or Thailand on 26 December – they can fail when most needed.

The main immediate requirements for the many foreign tourists who survived were for immediate rescue in a small number of cases, help to find missing family

members, emergency medical care for injuries in a large number of cases, for establishing contact with families, replacement travel documents and as rapid evacuation as possible. Many people were traumatized by their experience, and getting them out of the affected area made great sense, both for their own well-being and to reduce pressure on local hospitals and other services.

The other set of physically affected people were Thais – often quite poor Thais – from fishing villages along the coast north of Phuket island. Many of these communities were extremely hard hit, with housing largely destroyed, water supplies contaminated, infrastructure badly damaged, and large numbers of people dead or missing. The initial foreign government response, including our own, was focused unsurprisingly on locating and supporting our own citizens, so these people were largely assisted in the first phase by Thai government agencies and Thai and international NGOs.

What was the Australian government's response and why did it work?

When it became evident on 26 December that a major – if as yet undefined – disaster had occurred, consular officers from the Australian Embassy in Bangkok travelled to Phuket on the first plane following re-opening of the airport. They were supported by embassy AFP officers, Thai staff who provided linguistic



The Tsunami hit at the peak of Thailand's tourist season

skill and local knowledge. Taking advantage of the fact that hotels continued to operate, they immediately set up an office in an hotel and began systematic searches of hospitals and mortuaries to locate injured and dead Australians, and hence to relay back to Australia information which could be used to respond to enquiries by anxious relatives in friends in Australia. This initial team also set up a 24-hour post at the Phuket provincial government centre to assist relatives and build our data on missing persons. Here, boards carrying pictures of the deceased were displayed to assist visual identification, and officials and a growing army of volunteers assisted survivors and arriving relatives.

At the Australian end, DFAT's crisis centre and consular operations centres in Canberra were activated, and rostered staff quickly recalled from holidays. This has become a fairly well-honed operation given the number of mass casualty incidents we have faced in recent years. 1-800 numbers were activated and publicized throughout the media, and banks of trained but volunteer DFAT officials began taking thousands of enquiry calls. Over 85,000 calls were logged in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami and more than 15,000 Australians were initially reported as missing. Computer systems logged these into an existing consular management database, and data began to be matched with that coming in from the field. The co-located crisis centre began the inter-agency process of looking at the wider need for a government response as the scale of the disaster became evident.

Several lessons learnt from previous incidents – in particular the first Bali terrorist bombing in 2002 – came in to play at this point, and were, in my view, key to the success of the Australian response.

The first was not to underestimate the potential scale of the disaster, but to ramp up quickly our response capability, even if in the end it may prove to be more than required. The second was to have a dedicated media response unit, that could service not only media demand for detail but serve to inform a worried population back in Australia. The third was that this response should be multi-disciplinary, able to operate essentially independently and have with it necessary skills and supplies. And the fourth was to activate a commercial disaster management support company, Kenyon International, to provide specialist mortuary and related services.

So by 28 December, two days after the tsunami, a team left Canberra for Phuket by dedicated aircraft. On it were DFAT consular officers, DFAT and Centrelink trauma counsellors, a surgery team from the Canberra hospital, a media specialist and officers with computer and other skills to manage communications and databases. Most importantly, it included an Australian Federal Police disaster victim identification (DVI) team, including a range of forensic specialists, which was

augmented over the following days as the scale of the disaster emerged. Australian Defence Force linguists and logistics specialists were assigned to the team, and a chaplain and DFAT doctor subsequently added.

With the office and preliminary logistics set up by the initial Bangkok embassy team, the arriving specialists swung into action within minutes of arrival in Phuket. Although other countries had dispatched consular officials from their embassies in Bangkok, Australia was the first to have in place a fully integrated capability. This was both a focus of subsequent criticism in Europe of the slow and inadequate response by some governments, and the reason Australia moved into a leadership role, with Thailand, in managing the overall international response. It has to be said that the close relationship between the two countries, and in particular the longstanding close engagement between our two police forces, the RTP and the AFP, was a key factor.

The AFP team included specialists who had led the disaster victim identification (DVI) process following the first Bali bombing. They were able to provide guidance to the Thai authorities on the application of international-standard identification procedures and, as the scale of the disaster became evident, took the lead in building an international response team together with DVI teams arriving from other affected countries.

More than 33 countries eventually joined this group, which in due course was named the Thai Tsunami Victim Identification (TTVI) centre. It still exists, for the work is not yet complete. Although a mini-United Nations, with all the potential to descend into acrimony and indecision, it in fact proved to be remarkably harmonious and effective – indeed a model of international cooperation.

In my view, there were four reasons for this. DVI specialists work to an agreed international standard, set by Interpol, so there was fairly broad consensus on operating procedures. Secondly, the AFP proved to be excellent managers and diplomats, adept at getting others to cooperate. Thirdly, I was given the authority to commit Kenyon International to support not just Australia, but the entire operation, allowing for a major supply chain to swing into action, including for the sourcing of refrigerated containers, mortuary supplies and computer equipment. And finally, the Thai authorities made things happen: a well-equipped building was provided for the TTVI, power supplies were delivered to refrigerated containers and limited helicopter support (Thai and international) made available to DVI teams. Given the widely dispersed nature of the crisis, the limited availability of helicopter support was a limiting factor – but most was quite naturally drawn off to support the critical relief operation in Aceh.

In the days following the tsunami, thousands of bodies were located and moved to improvised mortuary sites in a series of geographically-dispersed Thai Buddhist temples. This was a sensible approach, but raised a number of urgent issues and challenges. The bodies were rapidly decomposing in the oppressive heat, setting a limit not least on the period when visual identification might be possible and certain. Hence the urgency of locating refrigerated containers. Secondly, pressures from relatives for release of bodies had to be set against the agreed need to work to international forensic identification standards. In a climate of high emotion, this is a difficult position to sustain. It is important in this context that DVI specialists be separated from relatives – it is emotionally draining work without dealing with this aspect and the risks within it for compromises to be made. This is the job of consular officers and local officials, but many countries had insufficient consular officers to meet demand. Well-intentioned but unskilled volunteers moved into the gap, but this did not always make for a smooth process, as expectations often outpaced reality.

With makeshift conditions in temples unsuited for the purpose, the risk of a disease outbreak brought about by body fluid leakage and decomposition became a major concern. Good practice by the international DVI teams, the Kenyon supply line, specialist advice from the US Centre for Disease Control and sound Thai practices meant that this did not happen. But it needs to be factored in to contingency planning.

All of the above happened under the intense scrutiny of a news hungry international media. A disaster generates an enormous thirst for accurate information. There was enormous scope for erroneous and unfounded reporting, which could raise anxiety levels of the thousands of relatives who still did not know the fate of loved ones. Alone amongst affected countries, Australia arrived with a media strategy and the capability to implement it. An experienced DFAT diplomat and media specialist fielded all media enquiries and we immediately established a daily media conference to meet both Australian electronic and print media deadlines.

In the absence of other spokesmen, we widened this to include availability to Thai and foreign media. For a period, the team leader was accompanied by the AFP DVI head, to answer pressing questions about DVI processes to relatives and families who otherwise may have seen this process as a bureaucratic obstacle to the return of loved ones. Explaining these processes to the foreign media made a major contribution to improving knowledge of the situation, of DVI processes, of what relatives could do to assist by assembling ante-mortem data, and hence to lessening anxiety and emotion levels. In short, a media strategy is indispensable to management of any crisis.



A multi-disciplinary team operated over a wide area.

With a multi-disciplinary team operating over a wide area, a management strategy and good communications are also critical, without interfering with operational effectiveness and the need for flexibility. Our approach was to begin each day, at 0700, with an 'all agencies' coordination and tasking meeting, with staff deploying to the field by 0800. This enabled *sitreps* to be provided to Canberra each day to assist the DFAT crisis centre in monitoring overall strategy and resources. Throughout the day, the office fielded enquiries, channeled communication from officers in dispersed locations, input data into the consular database and dealt with logistics, such as transport. An extended and emotionally draining crisis, with long hours of intense engagement, takes its toll, and after a week or so we needed to ensure some time off for staff, or rotated staff from Australia or regional posts. Staff welfare and the sustainability of an extended operation are important management responsibilities, and we were supported in this task by a DFAT and AFP counsellor, a chaplain and a doctor, who could also be tasked to other support duties.

For consular staff, crises can be both physically and emotionally taxing. In this case, consular specialists spent long hours trawling through mortuaries, abandoned hotels and other sites seeking to identify missing Australians or assisting injured Australians with documentation, advice and other forms of support. The sight of hundreds of decomposing bodies, and the stench, will never be forgotten. Many survivors were in an emotionally-charged state, which cannot but affect the consular officer. Arriving relatives, too, could often be abusive and unreasonably demanding, but that comes with the turf – it is a fairly normal human reaction – and points to the need, well-recognised by DFAT, for comprehensive consular skills training. Consular officers spent many hours negotiating with local officials on death certificates and release arrangements, seeking at the same time to meet the wishes of relatives.

Consular officers were often at the front line, too, in managing the role of volunteers. In Phuket, Australian residents and visitors provided enormous support to the government's operation, manning airport and other enquiry desks, providing transport to survivors and relatives, visiting hospitals and manning identification desks at mortuary sites. They were an invaluable resource multiplier, but as untrained volunteers, needed guidance on processes to ensure their actions met Thai government and international DVI requirements. While volunteer management was a somewhat haphazard process (in the end, we had no authority over volunteers), it worked remarkably well through a combination of commonsense and goodwill, and commitment on the part of individuals.

Finally, I should underline that technology provides ever new and useful ways to improve communication and data management and transmission in disaster situations. But the proliferation of systems, even within our own government, raises real issues of compatibility and interoperability. Common platforms and data exchange is, for now, probably an ambit claim, but it should be a medium-term objective. In consular and DVI work, this is further complicated by issues of privacy, and of course in terrorist incidents further complicated by issues of both evidence tenable in court and national security-related classified information.

Conclusion

The CEO of Kenyon International, Bob Jensen, describes three common goals in responding to a mass casualty incident:

- to preserve the dignity of the deceased;
- to meet the rights and needs of the living – that includes families, of course, but also survivors and affected communities; and
- observe the requirements of government investigations.

Mr Jensen has in mind incidents like aircraft or train crashes, but it applies, particularly, to the collection of evidence in terrorist incidents and the observance of DVI requirements in victim identification. As we have seen recently, mistakes are distressing and costly and must be avoided, hence the importance of training and preparation.

Managing these three goals in a highly-charged environment, under pressure from governments, the media and families, is difficult. Balancing flexibility, empathy and adherence to regulatory requirements is similarly challenging.

Following the tsunami, both the UK and Swedish governments held formal inquiries into their responses. The UK concluded there was a need for preparation of concise, useable plans, clearer definition of the respective roles and responsibilities of relevant government agencies, and better handling and recording of inquiry calls in London. The Swedish government, too, found inadequacies in registration procedures and that, overall, the government did not have an effective organisation or leadership structure for handling crises. While systems developed in Australia largely avoided these pitfalls, each new crisis presents new challenges and there is no room for complacency.

Since the tsunami, we've seen disaster handling in situations such as the earthquake in Pakistan and Hurricane Katrina in the United States. These incidents point to the difficulties in developing widely applicable approaches to what are very different situations, and the complications that can arise in operating in a multinational context in a remote and inhospitable location, on the one hand, and a complex domestic inter-agency structure on the other, where infrastructure, skill and resource advantages were negated by shortcomings and rigidities in management and leadership.

Australia enjoys the luxury of having a substantial body of relevant skills – and, by now, experience – of disaster response internationally. Our advantages lie in an ability flexibly to set aside agency allegiances and to work cooperatively together, particularly in adversity. It's something of a national characteristic, and one that is highly valuable, and seen each year domestically in the way emergency services and communities respond to bushfires, cyclones and other emergency situations.

But as I hope my account of our tsunami response in Thailand shows, we need a solid basis of planning, training and equipping across a range of government agencies, the further development of contingency plans and of IT systems. In the end, though, disasters involve distressed people, and we should never lose sight of their individual needs. That is at the heart of our consular role overseas and is one, I'm proud to say, we do exceptionally well.