

# Memories of the December 2004 Tsunami: Limits to the Effectiveness of Officialdom

*By Chan Heng Wing*

Chan Heng Wing was Singapore's Ambassador to Thailand from January 2002 to October 2005. Here he reflects on official attempts in Phuket to help the families of the victims after the December 2004 tsunami. He recalls some of the poignant situations he and fellow civil servants on the ground had to face in dealing with the grief stricken relatives of casualties. He remarks that in a catastrophe officials need to recognise the limits to what they can do and understand that they will not be able to satisfy all requests. However, they must try their utmost and always treat the grieving family members with humanity.

## Introduction

Just over a year has passed since that Sunday morning in December 2004 when the most devastating natural disasters of recent history shook the earth killing nearly 200,000 people around the world. The earthquake and tsunami that day brought the greatest destruction and loss of lives to the northern tip of Sumatra. That was where Singapore concentrated its rescue and relief efforts making it the biggest operation Singapore has mounted overseas. There, we saw the effectiveness of government-coordinated efforts and the stories of our splendid men and women have been told many times.

After Sumatra, the biggest effort mounted by Singapore was in the provinces of Phuket, Phang-nga, and Krabi in southern Thailand. This effort was smaller in scale than the Sumatra operation but it was qualitatively different. In the December tsunami, more Singaporeans died in Thailand than anywhere else. Today, out of the 19 Singaporeans confirmed as missing in Thailand, 17 bodies have been recovered and their remains retrieved by their families, the most recent one

only just before Christmas 2005. As the victim identification process slowly comes to an end after more than a year's work by forensic experts from around the world, 966 bodies still remain to be identified from more than 3000 bodies that were found.

The operation in Phuket, Phang-nga and Krabi revealed the limits to the powers of a government and the extent governments can assist their own nationals in the days following massive destruction and when information is scarce or often unreliable. Ironically, in such situations, the efforts of individuals using human ingenuity to break through official barriers sometimes yield better results than official channels.

## Singapore's Casualties

According to Thai immigration records for the two-week period covering 26 December 2004, there were 20,000 Swedes visiting Thailand. Sweden suffered the highest number of deaths. More than 500 Swedes were killed in the three Thai provinces. For the same period, there were nearly 18,000 Singaporeans in Thailand and our casualty figure was 19. But these statistics mean nothing. Even one casualty is one casualty too many.

There could be many reasons why Singapore suffered far fewer casualties. Anecdotally, and this was the morbid humour running around Bangkok at that time, Singaporean tourists in Thailand were more likely to be in shopping centres and golf courses than on the beach that fateful morning. The wags in Bangkok joked that there are fewer Singaporean sun worshippers than Scandinavians as Singaporeans have too much sun already. In any event, after an evening of partying on Christmas night Singaporeans were more likely to be in bed. Interestingly, a Russian embassy official made the same comment about his own nationals. It is also interesting to note

that there were fewer casualties from Australia or Japan and this was explained by the fact that December is summer time in Australia and fewer Australians would have gone to the beach in Phuket during December. The Japanese, on the other hand, are brought up to know the signs of an impending tsunami and most of them got out of the way. The Nordic countries took the highest toll in Thailand.

### First Responses

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, a special Thai military aircraft flew foreign officials from Bangkok to Phuket on the afternoon of the 26th. Phuket airport had been closed for several hours as there were fears of a third wave hitting the airport, located on the northeast coast of the island. The two-member Singapore team arrived by early evening. There was no clear picture of the extent of the destruction and it was only in the subsequent 24 to 36 hours that the world realised the enormity of the situation. The first job for the embassy teams was in fact to help survivors return home and the Singapore team was busy issuing documents of identity since many of the survivors had lost all their belongings including passports and air tickets.

The Singapore team was to grow in size to more than 200 within three days as Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) helicopters, Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) rescue teams, police and forensic experts, counsellors from the Ministry of Health, and officers from the Embassy in Bangkok and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) were deployed. At the same time, the call centres in Singapore's MFA, the Police, the Embassy in Bangkok and the operation centre in Phuket's city hall were flooded with calls from families anxious about the whereabouts of their loved ones. The reports of people uncontactable reached a high of 333.

In a disaster like the December 2004 tsunami, a difficulty arises because many Singaporeans do not tell their families where they are when they travel. Therefore, of the 18,000 Singaporeans in Thailand at that time, many were in fact not in the tsunami area but as far away as Chiangmai, Bangkok or Pattaya. But since they had told their families they were going to Thailand, the understandable anxiety of families led to reports that these Singaporeans were uncontactable. After those reported uncontactable had made contact with their

families, many families did not call back to have these names taken off the list. A long follow-up process of re-calling the families had to go on. Sometimes we found that the family member had never left Singapore in the first place. When Mr. Wong Kan Seng visited the Phuket operations on 31 December, he offered a valuable piece of advice to Singaporeans travelling abroad: Keep family members informed of your whereabouts and contact numbers. Otherwise, efforts to help the families of victims will be diluted by having to use staff resources to pursue those who are in fact safe.

### Helping the Families in Phuket

For those of us working in Phuket, it became apparent very quickly which of the cases were the ones that needed the most attention. The families of those who were confirmed to have gone to Phuket arrived looking for help to locate their loved ones. They were both anxious and hopeful and they wanted action as quickly as possible. Their fear was that the longer action was delayed, the lesser the likelihood of finding their loved ones alive.

There were cases of family members in the same group surviving while others were still missing. There were cases of a whole group of friends holidaying together and all had gone missing. The families of this group of friends arrived in Phuket together wanting to go to the site to participate in the search and rescue effort. Others had come with a fatalistic attitude about the safety of their loved ones and were prepared to give DNA samples for identification.

To this day, I keep an old A4-size envelope on which a family member wrote five suggestions of how the Embassy should help locate the victims lost at Khao Lak beach. The suggestions were:

1. Comb all the ICUs and hospitals for unconscious victims that can be identified as Asians. Those who are conscious can identify themselves.
2. Check the naval ships off the coast of the three provinces as these ships had picked up survivors as well as bodies.
3. Interrogate the staff at the resort to amass all information possible.
4. Comb the beach in the Khao Lak area looking for Singaporeans.

5. Check with the local authorities constantly for unconscious survivors.

Each and every one of the suggestions on the back of that envelope burns in my consciousness.

### Search and Rescue Efforts

Fortunately, our SCDF team had arrived on the scene to help the Thai authorities but as the Thais had no immediate instruction for them, we sent the SCDF team into the Khao Lak area. There they stayed for more than four weeks, looking for Singaporeans and also recovering many other bodies. They had gone into the hotel rooms of these Singaporeans but only managed to find some belongings like old clothes and shoes. The rooms had already been ransacked by then and all valuables were gone.

With the help of the Defence Attaché's office, we sent out four teams to scour more than 10 hospitals in a 200 km stretch of coastline where the tsunami struck. Most touching were two Singapore men who arrived in Phuket on their own to volunteer their effort. They wanted no money for their expenses and found their own transport to search one sector of hospitals for ten days. They did not even want their names to be recorded. Their efforts were inspiring.

Anxious families started to have dreams of their loved ones and the SCDF team were sent to sites resembling what was in their dreams to try to locate the remains. I put my foot down when they asked for a RSAF helicopter to fly out to an island on the Andaman Sea because of a dream that one of the victims may have been washed ashore there. Nonetheless, the RSAF pilots made a detour to some islands off the coast of Khao Lak on one of their regular sorties but nothing was found. The bodies of this group of victims have all been identified after several months and the remains retrieved by the families. The assignment of the Emergency Behaviour Officer teams from the Ministry of Health was a great source of comfort for the families as the families now had a trained person in handling psychological trauma to interact with.

### Embassies Criticised

To the great regret of the team in Phuket, we never managed to find any survivors and only began to recover the bodies in the subsequent months as the remains were identified. The families of some of the victims

were distraught with grief and scolded the Singapore team in Phuket for our ineffectiveness. I was accused of being "morally uninvolved" and "emotionally cold". But compared to one of the Nordic ambassadors who was punched and spat at by his countrymen in Bangkok for not being able to help, the Singaporeans' impatience and unhappiness at our inability to help were understandable expressions of their anxiety at that time.

Other embassies in Bangkok were severely criticised by their nationals in that period. One survivor from a Western country created a minor controversy in the media at home when he complained about the poor service by the Embassy in Bangkok. His main complaint was that the Embassy could not provide him with toothbrushes after the ordeal. After a round of recriminations in the press and by the MPs of that country, it was only the emotional letter by the Ambassador's mother to the press that stopped the criticism. Almost every embassy in Bangkok was criticised by its nationals for being ineffective.

In a catastrophe, when order breaks down and pandemonium reigns, official channels are often not the most effective means of caring for an individual's concerns. There were many anecdotal cases of individuals who paid their company drivers or staff members to enter the cordoned-off areas to look for loved ones. These Thai nationals move easily among the officials and the villagers, sometimes not observing directives that have been announced on the security of the area.

In many places, and especially in a disaster area, the informal bypassing of the official position is quite common when the officials on the ground are themselves not sure of the directives from above. Whether there were offers of money to the local people or not, the private individual operates with greater flexibility than an official representative. How does the representative of a government deliberately ignore the official decision to cordon off an area when in fact there are no cordons to keep people out? Some families, unhappy with the progress of the Thai authorities, wanted the Embassy to criticise the Thai government. The question to me was: "Mr Ambassador, tell me how I can explain to my children why the Singapore government cannot push the Thai government to help find their father?" How do we explain national and foreign policies in the context of the plight of an individual?

As government officials we just have to understand the limitations as to what we can achieve but at no time forget the humanity required in dealing with human beings overcome with grief.

### The Need for Humanity

**T**he events of the December 2004 tsunami in Thailand bring home to officials the individual human predicament we have to face and the limits to what official channels can do in terms of bringing about results. The humanity in all of us tells us that we have to do the utmost even though what the families of the victims really want can probably never be achieved. We are most helpless when we know that hope is dim to find the missing person still alive. Even finding the remains of the victim is not within the immediate powers of any government in such a catastrophe. And even if the official becomes personally involved in an individual case, success is still not assured although the family may feel more consoled that they are not dealing with a cold face. As government officials we just have to understand the limitations as to what we can achieve but at no time forget the humanity required in dealing with human beings overcome with grief. ■