



**National Workshop on Tsunami
Lessons Learned and Best Practices in
Thailand**

**Report and Summary of Main
Conclusions**

Bangkok, 30-31 May 2005

Introduction

1. On 30 - 31 May 2005, Government officials from the national and provincial levels; representatives of UN agencies; and national and international NGOs convened in Bangkok to discuss lessons learned and best practices related to the national and international response to the 26 December 2004 tsunami disaster. The aim of the workshop was to provide key actors with an opportunity to share reflections, discuss key achievements, and make recommendations aimed at strengthening disaster response and preparedness systems. The workshop was held in the context of a regional lessons learned initiative that included national workshops in four tsunami-affected countries, followed by a regional lessons learned event in Indonesia (13-14 June 2005).¹ A total of 64 persons participated in the national workshop in Bangkok (see list of participants attached as Annex I).

2. Welcoming statements were made by Ms. Joana Merlin-Scholtes, the UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator in Thailand and by Mr. Rashid Khalikov, Head of OCHA's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. The workshop was officially opened by Mr. Kittiphong na Ranong, Director-General of the Department of International Organizations, Royal Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

3. It was recognized at the outset that Thailand had not requested international financial assistance following the tsunami, but that technical assistance, including from international actors such as the United Nations system, had been welcomed. It was also stressed that while a tsunami of the scale experienced on 26 December 2004 is a relatively rare event, Indian Ocean countries and their neighbours in the Asia and Pacific region are host to a wide range of natural and other hazards that have significant adverse potential. As such, lessons to be drawn from the tsunami response should have a broader scope and be relevant in relation to natural disasters of varying scale and frequency.

4. Opening statements were followed by a detailed presentation by the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (DDPM) of the national institutional arrangements for disaster management and efforts underway to develop and field-test tsunami evacuation plans in the tsunami-prone coastal areas.

5. The workshop consisted of plenary and working group sessions (see agenda attached as Annex II). During the first day (30 May 2005), participants divided into three working groups to discuss:

- Disaster Preparedness Planning;
- Legal and Institutional Frameworks; and
- Stand-by Arrangements.

¹ National Lessons Learned workshops were held in Indonesia, Maldives, Thailand, and Sri Lanka during the course of May and June 2005.

On the workshop's second day (31 May 2005), the following four topics for discussion were addressed in plenary (no working group sessions were held on day 2):

- National, International and Non-Governmental Response;
- Coordination;
- Risk Awareness/Early Warning; and
- Early Recovery and Rehabilitation Efforts.

The outcome of these discussions is summarized in Annex III.

Main Conclusions and Recommendations

6. Despite the extraordinary nature of the disaster, participants agreed that the response of the Royal Thai Government to the tsunami had generally been effective, as highlighted by the fact that very limited secondary loss of life was experienced in the affected areas. The following general factors were identified as contributing to the overall effectiveness of response efforts.

General Strengths

7. **Legal and institutional framework:** Although no national preparedness plan for the tsunami phenomenon was in existence prior to 26 December 2004, the legal framework and resulting structural arrangements for disaster management were (and remain) relatively clear in Thailand. National disaster management is under the direct authority of the Prime Minister, who directs various bodies of the administration through the Minister of Interior and the National Civil Defense Council. This structure is replicated at provincial and district levels; there, under the authority of the Governor and of the District Civil Defense Director.

8. **No *ad hoc* structures created:** The Royal Thai Armed Forces and other Ministries are brought into the response framework through the National Defense Council. The Thai Red Cross is integrated into response at provincial level. No major new, special, or *ad hoc* structures were created for response purposes in the aftermath of the tsunami and the system, supported by resources available from the national budget, was considered to have worked effectively in many respects.

9. **Robust involvement of line ministries and armed forces:** The scale of the disaster exposed certain weaknesses at the local level, particularly regarding preparedness planning and general awareness, during the very first few days of the response (see below). However, the robust capacity and involvement of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, who were involved in most aspects of the relief operation during the first week, offset some of these initial shortcomings. Likewise, line ministries and departments quickly deployed staff and assets to the region in support of local authorities.

Best Practices

10. Discussions in the various working groups and in plenary helped identify a number of specific areas, in addition to those mentioned above, in which disaster preparedness and response efforts had been effective. A number of these points were suggested as best practices:
11. **Effective provision of emergency health care:** As mentioned, secondary loss of life was limited as a result of effective emergency health care provided to injured Thai and foreign nationals. Authorities were also able to provide certain psycho-social support to victims, and monitor and control the spread of communicable diseases in the affected areas. It should also be mentioned that foreign nationals could be evacuated as a result of effective cooperation between Thai and foreign authorities.
12. **Environmental response:** Although the environmental effects of the tsunami are still to be fully determined, quick action taken with regard to the environmental impact of the tsunami (e.g. clean-up of the coral reefs) may have limited the impact of the disaster on sensitive ecosystems and, consequently, on livelihoods, especially in the fishing and tourism sectors.
13. **Early recovery efforts:** Prompt action undertaken in support of local communities and economies may similarly have limited the long-term effects of the disaster and helped vulnerable groups regain their footing. Interventions mentioned during the workshop include the speedy salvage of fishing boats that were washed out to sea when the tsunami struck and the provision of financial assistance. In addition, interventions by the Government, with support of the UN, in the education sector allowed formal schooling to continue practically uninterrupted in the affected areas, despite destruction of infrastructure and loss of life among the personnel.
14. **Effective engagement of civil society and the private sector:** The contribution of the Thai civil society and private sectors both in the affected areas and nationally can hardly be overestimated. Major areas of contribution included transport, telecommunications, food and water. Needs, such as those related to bottled water, were entirely covered by private and NGO contributions.
15. **Action on lessons learned:** It should be noted that several lessons learned and recommendations resulting from internal Government evaluation exercises following the tsunami are already in the implementation stage (e.g. the elaboration and field testing of evacuation plans and the set up of a comprehensive early warning system). It was recognized that only tangible action on lessons learned will lead to improvement in the area of disaster preparedness and response.

Areas for Improvement

In addition to best practices, participants also identified a number of specific areas in which improvement and further work would be necessary.

16. **Need for national preparedness plan:** Participants stressed the urgent need for a comprehensive national preparedness and response plan that would bring all relevant ministries, the armed forces, local government, and other entities together under a common set of principles and agreed practical arrangements.
17. **Improved utilization of resources in emergencies:** As relief supplies are readily available for local purchase in Thailand, it was deemed unnecessary to create emergency stockpiles of most items. Instead, it was recommended that the national disaster plan should include a “market analysis” to identify procurement options in the various provinces that can be quickly accessed in case of need. Further, it was recommended that measures be put in place to allow Government financial resources, which are generally available for disaster response activities at local (province and district) level, to be quickly utilized by Governors and local Civil Defense administrators. This may involve delegation of authority.
18. **Managing contributions:** The tsunami disaster triggered an unprecedented outpouring of national and international generosity. As in other parts of the region, the scale of the disaster and the attention generated by media brought contributions from national and international actors. In Thailand, the fact that many foreign nationals were affected further increased the feeling of solidarity regionally and internationally.
19. While, as noted above, technical assistance provided by multi- and bilateral actors through traditional channels was received and effectively utilized, large quantities of inappropriate in-kind donations provided by individuals and non-governmental organizations could not be utilized. Managing these contributions placed major, unnecessary strain on already burdened disaster management authorities. The arrival of large number of inexperienced volunteers and well-wishers also constituted a burden on authorities.
20. It was agreed that authorities should seek to improve communication to potential providers of assistance regarding assessed needs and find an acceptable method of declining or redirecting unneeded contributions. In this regard, support was expressed for initiatives such as the Guiding Principles in Disaster Response and the Humanitarian Accountability Project, seen as important steps towards improving the efficiency and effectiveness of international assistance.
21. The fact that the Government did not formally request international assistance, while welcoming spontaneous gestures of generosity also created room for misunderstanding, especially at the local level. It was therefore recommended that administrative instructions should be issued on how to act in future situations.
22. **Protection of vulnerable groups:** It was stressed that in the aftermath of future disasters, greater attention should be given to protection activities

aimed at vulnerable children, with regard to their possible exposure to sexual exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. It was further recommended that substantially more attention should be paid to the needs of ethnic minorities and unregistered migrant workers, which may have been largely overseen during the tsunami response operation.

23. **Involvement of affected communities:** It was recommended that substantially more attention should also be paid to the involvement of beneficiaries in the design and implementation of emergency assistance programs.

24. **Coordination of staff deployments:** The deployment of government staff from the capital and nearby provinces in support of the local authorities in the affected area was considered to have worked generally well. However, it was recommended that in the future this should happen in a more systematic way, i.e. according to an agreed plan that establishes in advance how deployments should take place.

25. **Coordination among international actors:** A unit was set up in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and similar structures were created at provincial level to deal with international actors. Participants discussed a number of areas in which coordination of international actors could be improved. It was, for instance, suggested that a comprehensive database of actors and sector/locations of operations would have been useful (e.g. a “Who, What, Where?” database).

26. **Needs assessments:** It was suggested that pressure from Headquarters on international relief agencies, particularly those of the United Nations, to produce urgent sector-specific needs assessments following the disaster made it more difficult for agencies to participate in and contribute to joint needs assessment exercises. It was recommended that clearer guidance be provided in this regard.

27. **Emergency communication:** Excessive reliance on wireless telephones created communications problems in the early days, as the mobile telephone networks were not fully functional. It was recommended that a backup emergency communications system, utilizing HF and VHF radios and including local radio operators, should be set up.

28. **Training:** In order to further strengthen the response capacity of the government at provincial and district level, it was recommended that training in the handling and distribution of relief supplies should be provided and that technical equipment for urban search and rescue should be made available.

29. **Awareness raising:** General awareness regarding the tsunami phenomenon was low prior to 26 December 2004. Further, as no disaster planning had been conducted in preparation for a tsunami, initial warnings that were issued regarding seismic activity in the region did not result in action by the population. The workshops therefore recommended that efforts to increase awareness among the general public in affected areas must be

stepped up, for example by further integrating relevant information into school curricula.

ANNEX I: List of Participants

Attached as Excel file:

List of Participants.by section.xls

ANNEX II: Workshop Agenda



National Workshop on Tsunami Lessons Learned and Best Practices in Thailand

Siam City Hotel, Bangkok

30 - 31 May 2005

Day 1: Monday 30 May 2005

- 12:00-13:00 *Registration and lunch*
- 13:00-13:10 *Welcome by Ms. Joana Merlin-Scholtes, UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, Thailand*
- 13:10-13:15 *Welcome by Mr. Rashid Khalikov, Head of OCHA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific*
- 13:15-13:30 *Opening by Director-General of the Department of International Organizations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand*
- 13:30-13:45 *Presentation of the objectives of the workshop and of the agenda (Mr. Piero Calvi-Pariseti, Moderator)*
- 13:45-14:00 *Presentation on findings of Government's Lessons Learned exercise*
- 14:00-14:15 *Presentation of the topics for the day (Mr. Hakan Bjorkman, UNDP-DRR)*
- 14:15-15:30 *Discussion in working groups*
1. *Disaster preparedness planning (local and national levels)*
 2. *Legislative and institutional framework*
 3. *Stand-by arrangements*
- 15:30-16:30 *Coffee break*
- 16:30-17:30 *Presentation of working groups' findings to the plenary session and discussion*

17:30-18:00 *Wrap-up (Mr. Piero Calvi-Parisetti, Moderator)*

Day 2: Tuesday 31 May 2005

8:30-9:00 *Coffee*

9:00-9:15 *Summary of findings of day 1 and presentation of the agenda by Moderator (Mr. Piero Calvi-Parisetti)*

9:15-9:30 *Presentation of topics for the morning (Mr. Hakan Bjorkman, UNDP-DRR)*

9:30-11:00 *Discussion in working groups*

1. *National response (incl. Government, military)*
2. *International response (incl. multilateral and bilateral contributions)*
3. *Non-governmental response*

11:00-12:00 *Presentation of working groups' findings to the plenary session and discussion*

12:00-12:45 *Lunch*

12:45-13:00 *Presentation of topics of the afternoon (Mr. Hakan Bjorkman, UNDP-DRR)*

13:00-14:15 *Discussion in working groups*

1. *Early warning and awareness raising*
2. *Coordination of response (incl. needs assessments and info. mgt.)*
3. *Early recovery and rehabilitation efforts*

14:15-15:15 *Presentation of working groups' findings to the plenary session and discussion*

15:15-16:45 *Coffee*

16:45-17:00 *Wrap-up (Mr. Piero Calvi-Parisetti, Moderator)*

17:00-17:30 *Closing Statements*

ANNEX III: Summaries of Working Group Discussions

Attached as PowerPoint files:

National Lessons Learned Workshop - Group Discussions 30 May 2005.ppt

National Lessons Learned Workshop - Plenary Discussions 31 May 2005.ppt