Overview of the Tsunami Disaster

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Abstract
This is the text for the Opening Address for the Conference, Health Aspects of the Tsunami Disaster in Asia, convened by the World Health Organization (WHO) in Phuket, Thailand, 04–06 May 2005. The frightening reality of the costs (human and material) must be balanced by what has been and can be learned that, if applied, can make the world more resilient for the next event. At the time of this Conference, we are moving from response to recovery. The immediate conclusion relates to the consequences of the realization of a truly interdependent world. Given the huge resources made available, there is an increased need for accountability. Several factors will bear heavily on the outcomes: (1) risk of loss of momentum; (2) ensuring that no gaps in services occur; (3) ensuring that already marginalized communities do not become forgotten or even more marginalized; (4) support and respect of national leadership; (5) commit to enhanced coordination; and (6) develop mechanisms for joint and shared assessments. The available resources must be used to stabilize the livelihoods of people for years. Lastly, the reliability and sustainability of the important contributions of the military and the commercial private sectors for future events must be established.


Your Excellency Minister Public Health of Thailand, Professor Suchai, Dr. Lee, Director General of the World Health Organization, Esteemed Representatives of the local government, national and international health expert communities. Dear Colleagues, Ladies, and Gentlemen:

It is an honor and a pleasure to be with you here today as you meet in Phuket to review your contributions and accomplishments in the Tsunami response operation. All aspects of our human health are at the center of any emergency response. We all have been impressed favorably by the action of the WHO and its many national and international health partners in this operation. By placing itself at the center of action and engaging with the response actors, you do influence the course of action and lead initiatives on, for example, the global assessments. As we can see, just by glancing over the panels in which you are working during this Conference, the broad range of health aspects required to engage in an emergency already demonstrates the integration of the health experts in the larger context.

While we need you to uphold standards, set norms, and lead in developing best practice, we also need your practical leadership and engagement with all health actors in an emergency of this nature—only then can we ensure that we also act to bring your expertise to bear on the total health of the individual—and the society. The outcome of this lessons learned exercise, which will be a significant contribution to the overall learning for future actions that the national and international disaster response actors are now carrying out in a variety of ways in the region, at Headquarters, and at the national capital levels.
A few words about the very recent past that many of you have experienced so painfully. Today, we are four months and nine days after the Tsunami struck on 26 December 2004. The impact immediately killed hundreds of thousands of people and also immediately changed forever the lives of many hundreds of thousands who lived—but lost so much—families, friends, homes, property, jobs, and incomes; and with that, some of their confidence in life, and perhaps their identity and dignity as breadwinners of families and members of a community. While we were trying to understand that the frightening reality of so much human devastation as the loss of up to 230,000 human lives, and the local communities and governments under shock were assisting their members, and the international disaster relief system was quick to respond. Today, we have many sums—we know that up to 230,000 individuals were killed; two million people have been affected. We know that 65 governments have contributed to the United Nations (UN) [US]$977 million Flash appeal, and so far, one billion dollars have been given to the UN. Two billion dollars have been given to the Red Cross–Red Crescent movement and hundreds of millions of dollars were donated to the NGOs, largely by individuals and private donors. Thirty-five nations contributed military assets in one form or another. More women than men died in the Tsunami. Tens of thousands of fishermen have lost their boats and nets. Children have been immunized and schools have reopened. We know that the total of the reconstruction master plans of the four most affected countries amounts to [US]$10–12 billion. But we still continue to have difficulty comprehending the human impact of the devastation. It will take a long time to fully understand the social consequences of the destruction as communities have been destroyed, people have been displaced without the possibility of being able ever to return to their original homes.

Collectively, what have we achieved since the 26th of December? As is very well known to all of us in this room, the first relief is provided by the local communities, who, in spite of being so severely affected, assisted the even more affected. Neighboring countries and the international emergency response system—in spite of Christmas around the world—reacted quickly and massively. It has delivered relief, medical and health assistance, food, and material assistance to hundreds of thousands (two million) of people in spite of serious obstacles. The amounts of resources made available have been massive, but the coordination challenges have been equally massive. The national help by neighbors, military and local police, private corporations, and others surely outstrip what the international aid provides, but it is not accounted in the same way as the international assistance—which we regret, as this would help to put the international actions into perspective.

Now, while we think ahead about the long-term recovery and reconstruction, we also are in a period of lessons learned, and soon will see a number of evaluations of our responses to this disaster. If we are perceived as having been successful in delivering relief, in the final conclusion, there are some key factors I would like to highlight as crucial and specific for this region and this emergency:

1. Strength of the national governments and the existence of established national frameworks of legal and regulatory nature;
2. Very rapid mobilization of international early response teams and assets in support of the national action;
3. Immediate local and international military transport assets and material supplies;
4. Early availability of large amounts of financial resources. So far, [US]$6.8 billion has been recorded in our financial tracking system. Of this amount, which is a conservative figure, 14% has been given to the UN through the Flash Appeal; and
5. Finally, the human element—people show their very best sides when faced with a disaster and even more so, one of such shocking magnitude as is this one.

It has become a frequently repeated statement that this disaster was “unprecedented”—
1. It truly was an international disaster because so many countries around the world were affected directly by their people being killed or affected by the Tsunami;
2. It also was unprecedented in the expressions of compassion—helped by the media’s exposure of the suffering of so many people—and the very large amounts of money that the public and private sectors immediately gave to provide relief. Regrettfully, there have been disasters where more people have been killed, but not with such an international reaction; and
3. The number of actors in the response to the disaster was significant and posed some serious operational and coordination challenges for the affected governments and for the UN.

The immediate conclusion relates to the consequences of the realization of a truly interdependent world. We can contribute to shape the future of the devastated areas. The second conclusion is that, if the public and private sector is providing directly very large amounts of financial resources to the UN and NGO humanitarian system, we must design an accountability system that is appropriate to report back to these stakeholders in a proactive and coherent way so that they also understand how the resources are being used. This also means that governments, as traditional donors to NGOs in relief work, are less influential than before, since more money is being provided through individual and public donations. Thus, of the available, we must learn how to coordinate response better in this new environment. And, our accountability and the number of stakeholder groups increases.

Thirdly, the huge number of actors not only is an opportunity, but also a threat. The opportunity is here to strengthen the disaster relief international system and also the ability to reach many more people. The threat is measuring the need to provide strong coordination and leadership to such a numerous and diverse community. This adds immense pressure onto the affected governments and communities in a time when they have the least supply available and often little experience in providing the required coordination and leadership. The oft repeated word “accountability” has a very real meaning in that we must accept the responsibility to deliver concrete results and be able to
describe these results. The people that are expecting their homes, health clinics, and schools to be rebuilt are well-informed about the generosity of the international community, and ask for concrete evidence that the resources are being used for the intended purpose.

And, there now are some of real challenges for the governments, the international community, and the affected communities. At the same time, we know once the peak of intensity of the relief period is behind us, the long and often too slow work of recovery and rebuilding will create impatience and the perceptions of the loss of the early momentum of efforts. Several factors are important: (1) the risk of the loss of momentum; (2) ensuring there is no gap; (3) ensuring that already marginalized communities do not become forgotten or even more marginalized; (4) supporting and expecting national leadership; (5) committing to coordination; and (6) developing mechanisms for joint and shared assessments.

The risk of the loss of momentum—it is difficult to keep up the momentum of the ongoing relief while engaging in the planning and implementation of reconstruction. The reconstruction might take longer than what we wish. Actually, the peoples’ situations might deteriorate instead of improving.

Ensure there is no gap—Through our programs and during management, we must ensure that we do not contribute to create a gap between the relief and recovery phase, this period, and the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase. The gap risks throwing people back into crisis: it may create a loss of confidence, which in turn, can fuel social dissatisfaction. The onus is on us to ensure that we understand our part in the total effort, in which we must engage in coordination and cooperation. We must ensure that we contribute to sustainable efforts that will not undercut efforts to reduce risks and vulnerabilities.

Ensure that already marginalized communities do not become forgotten or even more marginalized—The affected areas are mostly marginal to the country’s economy. The human beings are not, and cannot, be marginal. We must commit to long-term engagement to support the viability of the recovery programs and ensure that they tie into the reconstruction programs and that these seamlessly support each other.

Support and expect national leadership—We must have a clear understanding about what reconstruction means and what in particular it requires of: (1) the coordination mechanisms that are in place and how these must be adjusted for the reconstruction phase; (2) the national government’s need to establish policy direction, frameworks, and in certain cases, new legislation (it will take time); and (3) the need for a sustained international assistance and engagement.

Engage in the cooperation and monitoring to ensure equity in assistance both humanitarian relief and recovery assistance.

Commit to coordination—The cost of fragmentation and lack of coordination is high. And above all, they risk undermining the accomplishments due to a lack of linkages. While the national lead and expertise are the bases for the responses, there is a body of standards, expertise, and agreed best practices, in the international community cooperation should form the basis on which the coordination in such situations takes place.

And among these, two major challenges stand out today. The issue of provision of transitional shelter is one. The government of Sri Lanka has committed to building 30,000 housing units before the 10th of May (before the start of the rainy season). In a normal year, 8,000 units are built. In Aceh, there is a need for 130,000 new homes. These are massive undertakings. In the Maldives, the government is seeking to improve people’s safety in the vulnerable islands as they rebuild.

In addition, for permanent new housing to be built, we know that there are major land tenure and land rights issues that will take a long time to settle. I noted, for example, that in pre-Tsunami Aceh, 5% of land was registered as “owned”. If there is a condition put on rebuilding that tenure is proved through registration of land rights, it is obvious that a lot of pragmatism and flexibility will be required to ensure people can stabilize their lives. This represents, by any standards, a major displacement crisis. With long-term displacement comes special health risks.

Accountability—The UN, NGOs, and governments must hold themselves accountable for results and the use of resources to the affected people and to the donors of resources.

Our common concern now is reconstruction planning in the Tsunami-affected countries. How do the international and national systems cooperate? How do we define roles that build on our strengths and resources? We also must build a better shared understanding and description of the situations and what the needs are. We must continue to develop mechanisms for joint and shared assessments, instead of having many assessments, with differing measurements, differing target groups, and differing timelines. We must aim at a higher degree of senior and strategic consultations, so that when we determine operational strategies, we mutually can reinforce each others’ objectives, even if we are very specific organizations. We must ensure that the impact of our actions benefits the population in need. For the Tsunami operations, there are some specific additional issues. The financial resources we have received exceed what can be utilized responsibly during the emergency phase. Each of us must think how the long-term use of the large amounts of financial resources can benefit capacity and institution building. This, in particular, pertains to the implementation of the early warning and preparedness systems that now are very high on the agenda. Undoubtedly, we will all benefit if we have the same message in our communications: we have received very large quantities of resources, we are grateful, and we shall ensure that these are used for the benefit of the populations in the region affected by the Tsunami. These resources also must help stabilize the liveli-
hoods of people for years, and thus, they must be able to avoid the risk of the gap I mentioned earlier. They must be used to help to build the preparedness and early warning systems that we know have been so successful in other countries in this region. This will take years.

The UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction convened in Kobe/Hyogo, Japan in January 2005 provided us with an Action Plan for disaster risk reduction. Only such a direction and an understanding that ultimately, disaster impact is reduced by reducing poverty and ensuring adequate preparedness and disaster response systems. It includes national investments in legislation, institutional strengthening, and developing national mechanisms for maintenance of such systems. The international system for response is important as it provides relief and support. But, it always will be a second-line response to the national mechanisms. We must work alongside national institutions to better protect people's lives, livelihoods, and physical property, as well as national development investments. We hope that this will all be at the center of this year's UN Economic and Social Council and General Assembly debate, as the Member States consider their progress on the Millennium Development Goals. Regrettably, we already know that the progress has not been good enough—certainly not to the targets set. We have a role also to contribute to more progress on the Millennium Development Goals.

The Secretary General for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Mr. Egeland, has a strong vision for the international humanitarian response system. To this end, the Secretary General of the UN and Jan Egeland took the initiative for Humanitarian Response Review. It aims to review why we were so ineffective in meeting the needs in, for example Darfur, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and what we can do to improve the performance of the international system. We have been responsive in the Tsunami, and hence, it is of significance for the international humanitarian response system to see what were the success factors, how situation-specific these factors were, and what we require to make sure that the system always is responsive, especially to the orphaned, forgotten, and slow moving disasters. This Conference will provide a significant contribution to this Review.

The better we harmonize our action, the more we can achieve. We must be able to respond to the small disasters that also have very large consequences on individuals' lives, as well as to those large disasters that spread their impact across borders and regions, and are constant reminders about the vulnerability of human society.

A few words to the colleagues in the military forces participating in the operation. In this part of the world, it is a well known fact that armed forces along with police and civil defense are the primary and crucial actors to respond in a national disaster or emergency. The Indian army not only responded to its domestic catastrophe, but also immediately came to the help of Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The Pakistani Navy helped the Maldives, and Malaysia and Singapore performed crucial and central tasks in Aceh, Indonesia. The United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and many, many others contributed.

To begin with, some of us humanitarian partners were not clear on how to relate to this resource. Being used to working with and sharing space with militaries in mostly conflict-affected environments, this situation was something new and a bit unknown, where we all responded to assist in the Tsunami relief. Now, we have seen the immense value of this assistance. This understanding will enable us to fully draw on the combined resources for the best results. The unpredictable nature of these resources must be explored further. Can we assume these will be available "next time"?

I thank you for your contribution to the Tsunami response, and count on your continued engagement to provide a better life for the communities on the stricken regions in the Indian Ocean region, and also for your cooperation in improving the centrality and quality of the international humanitarian system and strengthening of people's resilience.

Thank you.