



UNITED NATIONS

**Regional Workshop on
Lessons Learned and Best Practices
in the Response to the
Indian Ocean Tsunami**

**Report and Summary
of Main Conclusions**

Medan, Indonesia
13-14 June 2005

I. BACKGROUND

1. A regional tsunami lessons learned and best practices workshop was held in Medan, Indonesia, on 13-14 June 2005. It brought together 75 government, UN and NGO participants from Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, in addition to representatives of regional organizations and donors (see List of Participants as Annex II). This event was the culmination of a series of four national-level lessons learned workshops held in May and early June 2005 in Indonesia, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand.¹ The aim of the regional workshop was to share reflections and experiences related to the national and international response to the December 2004 tsunami disaster, and to formulate recommendations to concerned actors that would help improve disaster preparedness and response capacity at the national and regional level.

2. The workshop consisted of plenary and working group sessions (see agenda attached as Annex I). The first session of the workshop (13 June 2005) consisted of presentations by government representatives of Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand that provided valuable insights on the preparedness systems in place prior to the tsunami, the relief and early recovery operations, and the main findings of the national-level workshops. Following these presentations, participants divided into working groups to discuss lessons learned and best practices in relation to the *national-level* response in the following areas:

- The role of Governments and the UN in coordinating relief efforts;
- The role of national and foreign military;
- The role of the private sector; and
- Accountability.

3. On the second day (14 June 2005), participants focused on identifying recommendations on how to strengthen *regional* preparedness and response capacities that were addressed to the following actors:

- Regional organizations;
- International organizations;
- The military; and
- The private sector.

¹ The national lessons learned workshops were held as follows: Indonesia (16-17 May 2005), Maldives (17-18 May 2005), Thailand (30-31 May 2005), and Sri Lanka (8-9 June 2005).

II. MAIN LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

4. **The exceptional nature of the tsunami disaster** was highlighted. Such an event was acknowledged to be extremely rare in the region, which largely explains why no comprehensive early warning systems were in place. The extraordinary scale of the disaster helps to explain many initial response difficulties experienced in the affected countries; no nation, it was recognized, was prepared for a catastrophe of such a scope. The disaster shed light on the shortcomings of existing preparedness systems, underscoring the need for their significant enhancement.

5. **The level of risk awareness among the population was very low.** This was identified as one of the main reasons for the high death toll. In a few cases, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand, isolated communities had retained an ancestral memory of similar disasters and had fled to higher grounds when alerted by the initial tremors, illustrating the effectiveness of risk awareness in reducing the human cost of disasters.

6. Amid the grief over the extent of death and devastation brought about by the tsunami, there was also a **sense of satisfaction for the overall outcome of the relief operation.** Affected populations in many areas swiftly received basic emergency assistance, while health care interventions notably minimized secondary loss of life and averted large-scale epidemics.

7. As is the case in the aftermath of any disaster, **the affected communities themselves were the first and primary actors in the early relief efforts.** However, it was recognized that these communities were not consistently consulted on important aspects of the relief and recovery work once organized national and international relief operations got under way. Their involvement in needs assessments, planning and implementation of emergency assistance programs was not prioritized, although it should have been.

8. **The state of disaster preparedness in the affected countries prior to the tsunami was uneven.** Whilst some countries benefited from a clear legal framework and institutional setup, the setup in others appeared weaker, with some confusion (especially in the early days of the response effort) in lines of communication as well as regarding command and control. Often new, ad hoc legislation was passed and new institutions created specifically in response to the disaster, further compounding the existing confusion in roles and responsibilities. Coordination within the government at both the horizontal level (among different institutions) and the vertical level (between central and peripheral bodies) was often inadequate. Allocation of resources for disaster management, or the ability to disburse funds at the appropriate level in the administration, appeared in some cases problematic. It should be noted however that all the countries affected by the tsunami are currently in the process of addressing some of the legal and institutional weaknesses that emerged during the response phase.

9. It was recognized that **the militaries of the affected countries played a vital role** in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Being the first on the ground to assist communities, they quickly provided security, logistics support, communications, and delivered large quantities of relief supplies. In several instances, however, the military were severely stretched in their capacity to assist, partly because they had an insufficient amount of key assets, such as means of transportation, and partly because their assets and personnel had also been affected by the disaster. The transition from military to civilian control of the relief operations was considered satisfactory.

10. The generally **excellent cooperation between national and international military forces** was highlighted. It was noted, however, that in some cases the lack of status of forces agreements (SOFA) constrained the scope of the assistance provided by the foreign military.

11. **Civil society organizations** (NGOs, religious and other community organizations as well as – notably – national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies) **were hailed for their extraordinary contribution** to the relief and early recovery efforts. Such organizations, however, did not appear to be systematically included in the disaster management plans of the affected countries.

12. **The level of involvement of private businesses – both local and international – in the relief effort was unprecedented.** Businesses contributed not only financially, but also through in-kind donations, thereby helping fill some critical gaps.

13. While the high level of international interest in this disaster led to the provision of massive amounts of much-needed relief supplies, it also contributed to exacerbating many **problems traditionally experienced during large-scale disasters that receive high levels of media attention.** Numerous “well-wishers” arrived in the affected areas with or without resources, many without appropriate experience in working in disaster situations. The coordination and management of these well-meaning individuals and organizations placed further strain on local and national authorities. Furthermore, it was suggested that many less experienced actors did not follow established standards and guidelines on the provision of humanitarian assistance, raising serious accountability concerns. Some actors engaged in culturally inappropriate behavior that could be considered detrimental to the dignity of the victims. Lastly, the adverse impact of large quantities of unsolicited, inappropriate donations from private citizens, non-governmental organizations and even foreign governments was highlighted.

14. **The very large number of often diverse actors created acute coordination challenges,** particularly during the first weeks of the response phase. Local authorities, who were in charge of directing the relief efforts, were often weakened by severe human and material losses, and at times had to cope with unclear reporting lines and interference from various government bodies. Many non-governmental actors, who had little or no experience in humanitarian relief, were unwilling or unaware of the need to coordinate with

other partners. In some cases, the very high budgets at the disposal of some NGOs acted as a disincentive to coordinated action. Even large international organizations with a long history of involvement in humanitarian operations, at times took initiatives without prior consultation with other partners, and in some cases bypassed the government. At the same time, it was recognized that some of the coordination mechanisms that were put in place were dysfunctional, which encouraged some actors to work independently.

15. On an operational level, **the need for better information management** was highlighted. This concerned the gathering of information on damages and needs, the sharing of information about ongoing and planned programmes among all actors, and the dissemination of information about the relief operation to the affected populations. Most countries experienced severe **logistics and transportation challenges**, as the tsunami affected a very large area and crippled already weak road and airport infrastructures. **Telecommunications were also problematic**, as wireless telephone networks – as well as many land lines – immediately went out of order and national and international actors had to rely on shortwave radios. The crucial role played in many instances by local radio amateurs was acknowledged.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

16. On the basis of a review of the main lessons learned and best practices, participants formulated concrete recommendations on how to enhance existing preparedness systems at both the national and the international level. It was agreed that, although this exercise built on the experience of the tsunami, the recommendations would address the management of a broader range of disasters, the likelihood of which was greater.

National level

Governments of the affected states

17. Governments of the affected states were encouraged to **strengthen legal and institutional frameworks**, with a view to building their capacity to provide strong leadership in disaster response. A simple, unequivocal legal framework should establish a streamlined set of disaster management institutions, with clearly defined lines of command and control and a strong emphasis on decentralization. A national disaster preparedness and management plan should be developed, based on comprehensive risk analysis and detailing actions to be taken at each level of the institutional setup. Appropriate allocations should be made from national budgets to ensure the financing of the disaster management institutions, particularly at the local level.

18. As part of the national preparedness plan, governments should ensure that emergency supplies can be readily made available to disaster-stricken areas. This may include the setup of emergency stockpiles, the analysis of procurement options where commodities are available on the local markets, or

the mapping out of already existing resources. Backup telecommunications systems should be established, relying on simple and reliable means such as shortwave radio and taking into account capacities that exist at community level (i.e., licensed amateur radio operators). Threshold levels in the severity of disasters should be set, which would eventually trigger a request for international assistance. Administrative procedures should be devised to facilitate the entry, stay and exit of international aid workers and emergency supplies in case international assistance is requested. Status of forces agreements should be drawn up with the military of foreign countries willing to assist in case of disaster.

19. Governments should also **develop appropriate coordination structures and mechanisms** at both the central and the local level. The fulcrum of disaster response coordination should be located within the local authorities, with policy guidance and resource support from the central authorities and technical support from the United Nations. Local authorities should establish appropriate operational coordination mechanisms and assign responsibility for sectoral coordination according to capacity (that is, to local representatives of line ministries if available, or to international organizations with recognized, specific expertise).

20. Governments were encouraged to **implement the Oslo Guidelines for the use of military assets in humanitarian operations**. The role of the military and the police in early warning and disaster response should be clearly defined in the national disaster management plan. The military and the police should devise concrete mechanisms to enhance coordination and information sharing with other actors providing relief assistance. They should also consider integrating training exercises and logistics response systems with civilian agencies.

21. Governments should **take into account the extraordinary capacities that are often available within civil society**. The role of national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, national NGOs and other community organizations should be clearly spelled out in the national disaster management plan. Governments should moreover establish mechanisms to facilitate dialogue and cooperation with NGOs at both the central and local levels, and strive to act in a transparent manner in their dealings with NGOs.

22. **Risk awareness and community-based disaster preparedness should be introduced** in school curricula and in the formal training provided to local administrators, police and army officers, military personnel, and other relevant civil servants.

23. **A comprehensive, multi-hazard early warning system should be established**, which could inform the population of impending risks through a variety of channels, and which would be capable of exchanging information with similar systems in neighbouring countries.

Non-governmental organizations

24. NGOs, particularly those new to disaster response, were strongly encouraged to **respect existing principles, guidelines and standards** (particularly SPHERE and the Code of Conduct) when carrying out relief operations. They were also urged to enhance their level of accountability and transparency to the public (including the United Nations, affected governments, and local communities). NGOs, and other responding actors, should take the local context into greater account while devising their programmes, respect local customs and sensitivities, and effectively build on local capacities.

25. NGOs should furthermore **establish mechanisms for coordinating among themselves**, and actively participate in the coordination mechanisms established by local governments.

Private businesses

26. Private businesses were encouraged to **contribute to disaster relief on the basis of the principles of corporate social responsibility**, and to develop a corporate code of conduct on natural disaster response. They should also establish mechanisms for coordinating among themselves, so as to maximize the impact of their contributions to relief operations. Emergency Units should, for instance, be established within national Chambers of Commerce.

International actors

27. All international actors (i.e. United Nations and other international agencies, international NGOs and donor governments) were strongly encouraged to **respect the principle of subsidiarity of international assistance**. This entails that the government of the affected country not only has the primary responsibility for assisting the victims of a disaster, but also has the authority to coordinate and direct international assistance. International actors should refrain from delivering assistance without prior consultation with, and the explicit consent of, the government. They should also seek to strengthen established coordination mechanisms rather than bypassing them. Lastly, they should respect the political and cultural sensitivities of the affected countries.

28. All international organizations (i.e., United Nations and other international agencies and international NGOs) were urged to take all possible measures to **limit the widespread practice of rapid and frequent staff rotation**, particularly during the first weeks and months of the relief operations, in light of its negative impact on the quality of the response as well as on coordination.

All actors

29. All actors were urged to take concrete steps to **ensure the participation of beneficiaries in programme planning and implementation**. Moreover, specific mechanisms should be devised significantly to enhance the level of accountability to beneficiaries of all providers of relief assistance. The provision of assistance should be driven solely by the needs of the affected populations, rather than by the priorities of the providers.

Regional level

Governments of the affected states

30. Governments of the affected states were encouraged to **develop concrete mechanisms for cooperation at the regional level**. Four main areas were singled out. First, a regional multi-hazard, multi-nodal early warning system should be established, to be integrated into national disaster management systems. Second, a regional contingency plan should be developed, which would map out existing stockpiles of relief supplies and procurement options, spell out mechanisms for the deployment of experienced personnel for assessment and early relief, and establish systems for sharing logistics capacities and emergency telecommunications. Third, a regional disaster preparedness facility should be established. Fourth, joint training and simulation exercises should be held on a regular basis.

31. Governments should also seek to **develop a regional network of status of forces agreements**. This could either take the form of a single standard agreement, which would be preferable, or else consist of a series of bilateral agreements.

International organizations

32. United Nations agencies were encouraged to **explore the possibility of setting up regional inter-agency capacities for disaster response**. These would include a contingency plan, a logistics base with emergency stocks of relief goods, and other standby arrangements with rapid deployment capacities to disasters within the region.

33. The United Nations should **support and further strengthen existing mechanisms for knowledge sharing among disaster management actors in the region** through formal training, exchange of experienced personnel, sharing of experiences and best practices, and the development of a regional repository of knowledge.

34. In order to expand the role of the business sector in supporting humanitarian operations, the United Nations, in cooperation with relevant governments, regional organizations and Chambers of Commerce, should **develop a regional outreach program for private businesses**.

Regional organizations

35. Although it was recognized that the countries affected by the tsunami belong to different regional groupings (mainly ASEAN and SAARC) and that the involvement of such organizations in disaster management is still in its initial phase, it was recommended that **regional organizations explore possibilities for strengthening regional cooperation in disaster preparedness, response, and early warning.**

36. While it was acknowledged that setting up a regional preparedness system would have enormous cost implications, regional organizations were encouraged to **consider developing a coordination framework as well as mechanisms to enhance disaster preparedness at the regional level.** Areas of cooperation could include supply chains, standby arrangements, creation of a pool of experts, surge capacity, contingency planning, minimum standards, compatible Standard Operating Procedures, building of capacities and awareness, information sharing and cooperation.

37. Furthermore, **a framework for joint military cooperation for disaster preparedness should be developed.** In the case of ASEAN, this would entail strengthening existing mechanisms to include disaster response. In the case of SAARC, a standing military planning committee could be established. Within these regional organizations, a secretariat should be created to facilitate the development of the framework, as well as to share information, best practices and resources. Regional organizations should also organize joint simulation and training exercises, involving the military of both disaster-prone countries and potential donor countries.

38. Regional organizations were encouraged to **establish a regional disaster response system** similar to UNDAC. Areas of cooperation could include rapid assessments, regional deployment of expertise, mechanisms for interfacing with international organizations during emergencies, and emergency information management.

39. Lastly, regional organizations were encouraged to **help build a regional multi-hazard network.** Areas of cooperation could include information sharing, capacity building, technology sharing, joint infrastructure, and the promotion of common standards.

Non-governmental organizations

40. NGOs were encouraged to **establish a regional consortium, and to develop regional standby arrangements.**

Community organizations

41. Participants called for the **establishment of a forum and/or network of community organizations from tsunami-affected countries,** which would serve as an information clearing house and as a venue for sharing experiences and best practices.

Private businesses

42. Chambers of Commerce of affected countries were encouraged to **develop regional standby arrangements** with regard to the provision of goods, services, and logistics in case of disaster.