

FOREWORD

Operation Tsunami Assist

by David Templeman, Director General, Emergency Management Australia

Seldom does an organisation like Emergency Management Australia (EMA) have the extraordinary, though unfortunate opportunity, to contribute on a national basis to a truly international response to a catastrophe as the Indian Ocean tsunami tragedy that touched the world.

EMA was challenged and tested more than at any time since its creation and its first major disaster response 30 years ago when *Cyclone Tracy* devastated Darwin on Christmas Day in 1974.

EMA was first alerted to the massive earthquake off the north-west coast of Sumatra just 16 minutes after it occurred on 26 December 2004. At that time, the advice was benign in terms of a tsunami warning. However, by sundown that day EMA had been alerted the event had caused a tsunami and, as a result, our National Emergency Management Co-ordination Centre (NEMCC) was activated to 24/7. Within 48 hours, some 35 staff had been recalled from holidays across the country.

The NEMCC subsequently become pivotal in its role of co-ordinating the Australian Government's assistance for communities in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Under the Australian Government Overseas Assistance Plan (AUSASSISTPLAN), humanitarian relief supplies, specialist medical and public health teams, and even engineers, were sent to affected communities. A great deal was learned in the weeks that followed that will certainly enhance the way Australian authorities and our diverse communities respond to a large-scale disaster in the future.

Operation Tsunami Assist involved more than half of EMA's staff who used their emergency management skills in the NEMCC in liaison officer positions in the affected regions overseas. They provided pre-departure briefings for medical and public health teams from jurisdictions, and were involved in multi-agency taskforce planning meetings.



Mark Hilgert, Steven Riley, Donovan Croucamp, Joanne Laurence



This photo, taken by EMA's emergency recovery adviser Don Patterson, who spent two weeks in Jakarta, shows the devastation caused by the Indonesian tsunami in Banda Aceh



Attorney-General Philip Ruddock with Paul Keegan from EMA's Mt Macedon office in the operations centre

Our Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, also played a major role in approving 19 requests for assistance, made through Australia's Agency for International Development (AusAID).

Through all this intense activity – both at the very highest governmental level and on the ground in the affected regions – what impressed me the most has been the willingness

of everyone to commit to co-operation, and to work tirelessly and selflessly to find solutions for the massive problems caused by the tsunami.

This is most encouraging for those of us operating at the core of Australia's emergency management effort.

Not everything has gone as smoothly as we would have wished. Our biggest lesson is likely to be that no plan can ever be so completely devised for such a significant natural disaster. Daily we have had to adapt procedures and protocols and work through tasks assigned with little knowledge of their eventual satisfactory conclusion.

Take the example of the apparently simple request to supply water containers. While all of EMA's humanitarian supplies were assigned on the first two C130 Hercules to fly into Indonesia, we could not have envisaged the difficulty of trying to locate further

large supplies of collapsible plastic water containers. Eventually, the containers were located in Europe and at the same time, a large quantity of full two litre bottles of water were donated in Melbourne and shipped out of Hobart on a brand new catamaran on its delivery voyage to France. That's what I call initiative and co-ordination.

For me, the most satisfying of all the elements that EMA had to work through in the first month since the tsunami has been the level of collaborative collegiate effort by our friends in the States and Territories. All, including the EMA team, have responded magnificently to the priorities presented by the calls for help from our Indian Ocean neighbours.

David Templeman
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Emergency Management Australia