

Tsunami Disaster More than 100,000 dead

Massive Church response underway in several countries

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As the first stages of LDS-sponsored relief assistance finds its way into the hands of tsunami victims in southern Asia, Church members from all points of the globe work to deal with the staggering, deadly cost exacted by the Dec. 26 catastrophe.



Photo by Elder Dan Caldwell

Supply kits prepared by Chennai (India) Branch members.



Photo by Elder Dan Caldwell

A victim of the tsunami disaster in India now living in a tent city, receives supply kit.



Photo by Elder Dan Caldwell

Pres. Seong Yang, Chennai (India) 1st Branch, opens newly purchased items to be assembled in family kits.



Photo by Elder Dan Caldwell

Members of the two Church branches in the city of Chennai, India, load 600 family kits into truck on Dec. 29 for distribution among victims of tsunami disaster. Members purchased materials, then assembled kits in meetinghouse.

"It is a very sobering situation," said Church Emergency Response Director Garry Flake, who was in southern Asia establishing the foundation for what is expected to be a major Church relief response.

Meanwhile, a call for assistance from members worldwide was issued by the First Presidency.

All LDS missionaries serving in the nations of southern Asia impacted by the deadly earthquake and tsunamis are safe and accounted for, Church Public Affairs reported. Information regarding Church members in the region was incomplete at press time. There had been no reports of death or injury to members.

The earthquake-generated tsunamis impacted 11 nations and the death toll was approaching 115,000 lives, the *Associated Press* reported Dec. 30. The disaster is also to blame for a massive ongoing humanitarian crisis. Thousands have been left without homes, food and clean drinking water.

Brother Flake began his tour of impacted areas with a stop in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He was saddened by what he saw in the tsunami's aftermath.

"We went out early this morning (Dec. 30) to some of the devastated areas; we were astonished by the force of the water," Brother Flake said in a telephone media teleconference from Sri Lanka. "We couldn't believe seeing the walls that had caved down, the houses that had caved down, the people that are sitting alongside the sides of the road wherever their homes were. Literally thousands upon thousands have been displaced."

Church leaders in Asia provided immediate assistance to disaster victims from local resources, supplemented by humanitarian funds from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Emergency medical supplies and other materials were also purchased locally in the affected countries to speed relief to the most heavily impacted areas.

Brother Flake and other local welfare officials were working to complete an assessment in cooperation with government officials and international relief agencies.

"We are heartbroken to learn that thousands have lost their lives and extend our deepest sympathies to the families whose loved ones have perished in this disaster," said Bishop H. David Burton, Presiding Bishop of the Church. "We believe in the power of prayer. We encourage all to pray for those who are suffering, as well as for those who are providing emergency relief."

"Each day that I have been here, the number of mortalities has gone up," Brother Flake said. "As (the death toll) goes up the number of homeless has gone up."

Already, in Indonesia, the Church has provided medical supplies, body bags and other needed supplies such as tents and tarps and is arranging for more. The northern end of the island of Sumatra was hit particularly hard by the earthquake and tsunamis.

Members of branches in Sri Lanka, an island nation off the southeastern coast of India, have been assembling relief kits of various types and have provided some food items for displaced people. Distribution has moved quickly. Hygiene kits assembled by Sri Lankan members on Dec. 30 were transported that same day to make-shift homeless camps and distributed to victims.

"I again saw the value of a bar of soap," said Brother Flake, who participated in the distribution at the camps.

Numbered among the victims at camps receiving Church relief were children whose lives had been forever altered.

"Many of them are new orphans," Brother Flake said.

Meanwhile, members in Hong Kong were also assembling hygiene and baby kits to be delivered to Sri Lanka.

Members in Chennai (formerly known as Madras), India, did a clothing drive to help the Red Cross respond to the needs of the displaced people. Branches quickly assembled 600 custom kits which include clothing, eating utensils, hygiene items and bedding.

In Thailand, where devastation was primarily in the resort areas near Phuket, members in Bangkok assembled materials to help with relief efforts. The Church is also providing from there food, water and body bags.

Missionaries in the various nations have been performing valuable service. Their efforts include assisting with humanitarian efforts as coordinated by Church and other local agencies, translating for people in need, visiting hospitals and assisting displaced people.

Mission presidents are monitoring their efforts to see that missionaries are not placed in dangerous situations or exposed to disease.

In conjunction with life-sustaining resources purchased in-country, the Church was finalizing plans at press time to ship relief supplies to tsunami-impacted nations via air and in cargo ships.

Members living in affected areas spoke of the deadly suddenness of the quake-prompted tsunamis. Adam Hickenbotham, an LDS optometrist living in Thailand, was attending Sunday Church meetings when he learned a powerful tsunami had reached Thailand's coast. The news was not good.

"I went to the hospital. It was completely filled with people," said Brother Hickenbotham in an e-mail to friends and relatives. "The hospital system was not prepared for this many people and people were lying on the floor throughout the hospital."

Brother Hickenbotham's clinic became a makeshift communication center where people contacted loved ones via the Internet.

"I have heard stories of people being trapped in the hotel room as it filled with water or watching as their family was washed out to sea," he said. "Many people have nothing now. No clothes. No money. No passport; and have lost all their family."

Given the overwhelming scope of the multi-nation disaster, coordinating relief efforts poses understandable challenges, said Brother Flake. Church officials were working to forge alliances with fellow international relief agencies. Local governments have been quick to accommodate the Church's efforts to match resources with needs.

"In each country, we are working with government officials responsible for government response," Brother Flake said.

Transportation linkages were generally not disrupted by the tsunamis, so Brother Flake expected distribution of LDS relief supplies to move smoothly. Governments have accommodated Church requests to observe distributions of relief supplies and are appreciative of the Church's efforts.

In time, the focus of the global relief effort in southern Asia will shift to rebuilding and reconstruction. For now, the Church is concentrating on quickly delivering critically needed life sustaining provisions such as food, water, medicine, hygiene items and plastic sheeting for rudimentary shelter.

The Church's reputation for providing generous, efficient relief in times of need preceded Church welfare officials to southern Asia. A Sri Lankan official told Brother Flake: "Your medical (kits) — I know about these. I've seen them."

News that Church leaders were asking members throughout the world to participate in the relief effort brought comfort to Church units in impacted areas.

"Members and missionaries are so pleased throughout southern Asia with the word from the First Presidency asking that there be generous contributions to the fast offering fund this weekend," Brother Flake said.