

Asian Tsunami Response

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Current CISM Status

ICISF has received a number of phone calls and email messages from individuals and CISM teams offering assistance in areas struck by the horrific tsunami on December 26, 2004. We thank people for their gracious offers of help. Except for the following, no specific calls for help have come to the foundation's attention.

There is one CISM instructor on location who was sent into Sri Lanka by his government to assess the situation and to assist his fellow citizens. He will be in the best position to provide advice to ICISF on what services, if any, might be necessary. Another instructor from Australia has been asked to provide CISM training to local relief personnel in Thailand and that training will begin within a few days. The CISM team in Singapore is responding to a request to assist journalists who have witnessed many horrors and are returning home within a few days. ICISF has asked CISM teams in the Pacific to inform the office as to what resources might be available should they be needed in the weeks or months to come.

What not to do

First and foremost, no individuals or CISM teams should respond on their own initiative. No one should go to the disaster area without a specific request from a legitimate disaster response organization (the United States Military Forces, United Nations, Red Cross, Salvation Army, ICISF, etc.) Please coordinate any potential response with ICISF.

There are many reasons for asking CISM people not to self dispatch or self deploy to the disaster area.

- a) Search and rescue / recovery operations are ongoing. CISM services are among the very lowest of priorities and would be seen as unnecessary and intrusive at this time in the disaster. There is a substantial potential that an influx of CISM personnel might interfere with search and rescue efforts.

- b) High current priorities are for fresh, drinkable water along with food, medical care, shelter and the recovery of bodies.
- c) There is a major problem with severely damaged if not destroyed infrastructures. Transportation, communications, electricity, fuel, and lodging services are completely disrupted. Food for rescue personnel as well as for the impacted communities is in short supply. Non essential helpers would simply add to the burden and would be of limited value.
- d) Security is a serious concern in many of the countries impacted by the tsunami.
- e) There are enormous barriers caused by huge numbers of traumatized people, religious beliefs, language, culture, politics, nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, customs and traditions.
- f) At this early stage individuals and communities are immersed in severe shock and denial. They are not psychologically ready for most types of mental health assistance even if their culture endorsed it. Misguided help at this time could easily derail more appropriate assistance later.
- g) That area of the world is either not informed at all about CISM or, at best, only marginally informed about CISM services. Understanding and accepting CISM crisis intervention assistance from the outside world would be a monumentally difficult task for most people in the disaster zone. Small group interventions would be completely out of place especially in these early stages of the tragedy.
- h) CISM may find its greatest value when applied to search and rescue and other emergency services personnel either in pre-deployment preparations or weeks to months after their service in the field comes to an end.
- i) What most people need beside water, food, medical care and shelter is information about where to obtain resources and some guidelines for taking care of themselves and their families and neighbors.
- j) Much of the information people need can be provided by government institutions, disaster relief organizations, health care authorities, mosques, churches and temples.

- k) A substantial volume of helpful information about psychological reactions to disaster and potentially helpful suggestions and guidelines appeared on the ICISF website after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the USA. That information is still available today and can easily be downloaded. (If anyone has language proficiency for the languages spoken in the tsunami involved countries we would invite them to make their language skills available to ICISF for translation purposes. That would be an enormously valuable contribution to the relief effort.)

Rather than attempting to go into the disaster area we would strongly suggest that people contribute funds to Red Cross or Red Crescent organizations in their respective countries. Other potential organizations for donations would be the Salvation Army, UNICEF, or the fund established by President Bush to coordinate private donations to the relief effort.

It is not advisable to send food, clothing, tents and medical supplies directly into the disaster areas. Previous experience with disasters has taught valuable lessons. Directly transporting items into disaster areas when one is not working with established disaster relief organizations is fraught with problems. There is a very high probability that the goods that are sent will not be the right items or in the quantities necessary to satisfy the needs on the ground. It is expensive to ship such goods. The goods may spoil or be damaged beyond use while in transit to the disaster zone. Goods shipped outside of the control of disaster relief agencies are more vulnerable to theft by looters. They usually end up clogging the ports of entry in the impacted countries. Once they arrive in a port of entry they must be processed by overwhelmed local people. Then the items intended for relief must be repackaged and transportation must be found. There are usually insufficient trucks to transport the goods and there is no place to store them. Further clogging and inefficiency are the results and the people who need the assistance may never receive it.

The logistics of disaster relief have been worked out and practiced many times by relief agencies. Support of those organizations is the best path to follow in this current situation.

If Deployed

- Follow the guidelines and recommendations of the organization deploying you to the disaster.
- Learn as much as possible about the mission before deployment.
- Determine the length of time of your deployment.
- Try to determine which populations you are most likely to serve.
- Determine if there will be adequate housing, food, water, security, transportation, communications and other support services available before departing.
- Put as many of your personal affairs in order as possible before departing. Make sure someone knows where you are going and how long you are expected to be there. Any emergency procedures should be thought out in advance of your deployment. What should be done if you are injured? Is there a means of evacuation? Is your insurance likely to cover you? Who should be notified if something happens to you? Is your will in order?
- Who will be on the team with you?
- Are the politics of the situation being managed by someone or are you expected to take care of that too?
- What kinds of support will you and your team receive if you discover greater problems than anticipated?
- Who will you report to? How will communications be handled?
- Is there an exit strategy for the mission?
- People who have never worked in disaster relief should be prepared as much as possible for the exposure. They should be told what to expect and how local people are likely to respond to them. They should be informed of religious practices, culture, traditions and customs that they may encounter. They should be cautioned not to do certain things that local people might find offensive. They should be mentally prepared to view destruction and to encounter the strong human emotions that are associated with grief, loss and widespread incomprehensible destruction.
- People working in a disaster zone should be informed of potential dangers and they should be advised how to mitigate those dangers to their health and safety. The military refers to this a “force protection”. How do you plan to protect yourself and your team?

- Those going into a disaster zone should be encouraged to take periodic breaks and to sleep when they can. Disaster relief workers, especially those who are new to the experience may have trouble pacing themselves and may attempt to do too much for too long. Scheduled work times are helpful. Disaster workers need nourishment to keep their health and stamina intact.
- Remind disaster workers that they are providing valuable, sometimes life saving or life preserving services. They are making a difference in the lives of many. Well motivated people tend to work better in disaster areas. Even in the midst of all the terrible things around you in a disaster try to find meaning in your work or something that is a positive amid the misery.
- Focus on the mission at hand. Do not expect perfection in everything you do. Mistakes will occur. Problems and challenges will arise. Try to contribute to solutions and not the problem. Innovation is a great survival tool.
- Disaster relief workers should discuss some of the horror they have witnessed with their team members and selected, trusted family members and friends. Many find it helpful to share their experiences with a chaplain or an experienced leader.
- When returning from a deployment disaster workers should participate in support services that are designed to help them recover. One-on-one consultations, visits with the chaplain, participation in a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, stress education programs, rest and recreation programs and individual counseling can all be part of a recovery program.
- Pack backpacks and duffle bags with essentials that might not be available to you in country. Suitcases get in the way and are not easy to carry from one area to another.
- Do not forget pens, pencils and notebooks. They are essential in CISM work in disaster situations. (Keep a diary!)
- Be prepared to do only those interventions which are going to make sense under the circumstances. The Crisis Management Briefings (CMB) is likely to be the most useful tool for people in the disaster zone. The CISD small group process is likely to be essentially out of place unless one is dealing with small homogeneous groups, from the same organizations that have been exposed to about the same traumatic experiences. The CISD tool is best used for operations personnel after they have completed their service in the disaster area.

- Individual contacts (one-to-one) are the most frequent form of crisis intervention and that is likely to be true in the tsunami relief efforts.
- CISM trained personnel must keep in mind strategic planning. Remember the essentials in strategic planning. 1. **TARGET** (who needs help?) 2. **TYPE** (what kinds of help do the target populations actually need most?) 3. **TIMING** (when is the best time to deliver the specific crisis interventions?) 4. **THEMES** (what issues, concerns, or experiences of the population to be served are prominent and may cause CISM team members adjust the amount and types of interventions? Themes that may have a role in decision making include things like religion, culture, language, tradition, acceptance of help, primary victims or rescue / relief personnel). The final element of the strategic planning process is 5. **RESOURCES** (what kind and how many resources are available to provide an adequate level of crisis support? Can you obtain more resources if they become necessary?)
- Whatever is done to help people should make sense in light of their situation. We should not be doing crisis interventions simply because they are available. We should carefully choose the best interventions for the right target groups at the right time and under the right circumstances. In that way real help can be delivered when and where it needed most.
- If some things have been helpful to others in the midst of this terrible tragedy, collect your thoughts on those interventions and write about them so that others might learn from your experience.

I hope these remarks help to guide you whether you stay home and support the disaster relief efforts from afar or if you are asked to respond to one of the greatest disasters of the century.