

Opening Remarks

By
Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia

at

A Day of Remembrance
(Tsunami anniversary)

WHO, New Delhi,
26 December 2005

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**DR SAMLEE PLIANBANGCHANG
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the history of humankind, 26 December 2004 will be marked as a day of unprecedented tragedy. A day when over 200,000 people died, in a matter of few hours across six countries in South-East Asia. These countries were ravaged by earthquake and the resultant Tsunami, with epicentre at the North Sumatra, Indonesia.

Many millions of people were affected. The Tsunami snatched away their loved ones, and destroyed their homes and workplaces. And in some locations, the entire villages were completely devastated. They were ordinary people – people like us, whose lives were changed for ever during those traumatic hours that day.

A shocked and stunned world mourned the catastrophe, as one global family. The international community demonstrated solidarity, as never before. To meet the urgent needs of the affected people, donors provided funds and contributions in kind; Non Governmental Organizations, assisted with much needed services. They also helped in a big scale to mobilize communities for action.

Governments of the affected countries took immediate steps in saving lives and alleviating suffering of the affected populations. In many places, survivors, whose lives had been tragically shattered, also heroically contributed to these efforts. WHO mounted an unprecedented effort to help concerned governments in coordinating health inputs from outside. There were over 300 organizations providing assistance in the worst-affected areas, such as in Aceh, Indonesia, and in Sri Lanka. WHO worked along side with all the players that were dealing with health.

Major challenges included providing timely advice on health matters to those working in the fields. Through its global network, WHO identified and mobilized competent experts from around the world to serve in the affected areas. Despite fears, major disease outbreaks were prevented by the prompt and effective public health interventions. Water was chlorinated, and its quality monitored regularly. Insecticides were sprayed extensively in the areas to prevent a possible spurt in the vector-borne diseases. Effective measures for disease surveillance were quickly put in place.

These measures served as an early warning systems to track any unusual occurrence of diseases. Mental health needs were recognized and addressed through community networks, and by building resilience among the survivors. Country capacity was strengthened through training of health workforce. Technical guidelines and manuals in all major health areas were provided for field work.

Learning from that experience, Sri Lanka has updated its mental health legislation. In Aceh, Indonesia, community mental health systems are being strengthened. Training in the building of earthquake-resistant hospitals has begun in Indonesia. In Tamil Nadu in India, health facilities resistant to disasters are being constructed. Thailand has pioneered the Management of the Dead and Missing. This commendable initiative in Thailand has led to the improvement of the relevant guidelines, and to the establishment of a regional network. Countries are now focusing on strengthening their national disaster preparedness plans, the plans that have health as an important component.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

During the past year, we have learnt a lot on how to respond better to disasters. We have learnt: that it is important to fully engage people and communities themselves in disaster preparedness and response; that multi-sectoral cooperation in country will be optimized only through efficient coordination by concerned government, and that developing national capacity in this regard is an investment, that is essential to prevent and mitigate the impact of disasters.

WHO will continue to improve technical guidelines and standard operating procedures for effective use during disasters. WHO recently held a regional meeting in Bangkok to prepare the countries, especially their health sectors, to deal more efficiently with any future emergencies. WHO fully recognizes that whatever achieved were possible only with the combined efforts of many agencies. We would like to thank all those who supported these collective efforts in the health area. Above all, we would like to thank those thousands of nameless individuals who volunteered their services to help the affected populations.

This overwhelming support was truly a triumph of the human spirit and solidarity. There is no better way to honour those who died during the Tsunami, than by learning well the lessons it has brought forward. We have learnt so much. And yet, there are many more to learn, and much more work to be done. With the global unity and unwavering support that we have witnessed over the past one year, I am sure, we will forge ahead with certainty to achieve our desired goals in helping the affected populations.

In remembrance of those who lost their lives in the last year's tragedy, may I now request all of us to stand up and observe a minute of silence.

Thank you.