A soaring list of dead and injured on Thailand's southern coast

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The impact of the tsunami waves that began crashing into Thailand's southern Andaman Sea coastal towns at 9 a.m., local time on Sunday was only beginning to be comprehended two days later. By then, authorities had listed 1,473 dead and 7,000 injured.

Foreign tourists, holiday makers, resort staff and fishing villagers received no warning of the approaching disaster, despite the fact that officials of the country's Meteorological Department had been discussing the possibility of a tsunami hitting the area an hour before the waves struck. The worst affected provinces were Ranong, Phangnga, Phuket, Krabi, Satun and Trang.

Most reported deaths occurred in the Phuket and Phangnga areas, sites of popular tourist resorts. A high proportion were foreign tourists. But impoverished coastal fishing villages were also hard hit. Built on stilts, these were simply washed away, taking whole families and communities.

Government officials admit that casualty figures will continue to grow and that they have no real idea how many have been killed or injured. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra told the press on Tuesday that at least 2,000 had died. However no sooner had that estimate been made than 800 bodies were reported discovered in a Sofitel hotel, run by the French resort firm Accor, near the town of Khao Lak in northern Phuket. An Accor spokesperson said there were 350 guests and 250 staff in the hotel when it was hit by a wave of water.

The scenes in Khao Lak are symptomatic of the chaos in all the areas hit by the tsunami. Media reports describe bodies in swimming pools, in trees and in the streets. The town, which is 400 metres inland, has become uninhabitable. Soldiers are searching buildings and removing bodies in trucks. The risk of death from disease grows every hour. Water supplies have been contaminated with salt water.

The *Bangkok Post* reported that thousands were still missing in Phangnga. Rescue workers believed that many could be buried under the mud covering the beaches of the Khao Lak-Lam Ru National Park. The area—one of the hardest hit—is popular with European tourists who want to holiday away from the hustle and bustle of the more developed resorts.

Local volunteer rescue worker Tanaphon Sangkhum told the paper that in the first three hours of digging his team had found 50 corpses in the mud, mainly Thai and foreign tourists. "This resort town used to come alive during this time of year. But all the buildings and people were gone in the blink of an eye, swallowed by the huge tidal waves. It is the worst catastrophe of my life."

Medical facilities in the devastated areas have been unable to cope with the dead and injured, which continue to pour in. Director of the Vajira Phuket Hospital Jessada Chungpaibulpatana told the press, "Never before has the hospital been in such a chaotic situation."

But the government response so far has been out of all proportion to the scale of the disaster. As of Tuesday, according to deputy health minister Suchai Charoenratanakul, just 100 extra doctors and nurses had been sent to hospitals in the affected areas. The army has announced the dispatch of 19 truckloads of engineers to help with reconstruction and 100 engineers to work on lighting and water supplies.

In Krabi, survivor Sitthi Lhikao said locals were helping foreigners as the government had sent no aid. "Villagers here helped provide clothes to the victims, but it was still not enough." Many tourists had only swimsuits and needed dry clothes and sanitary napkins.

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He told Bangkok newspaper the *Nation* that the price of a carton of milk in the area had gone up 150 percent, and that the money being pooled by the villagers to help the stranded foreigners was inadequate to meet the need.

Rescue workers and paramedics sent to the remote Phi Phi Island, made famous by the Hollywood movie, *The Beach*, expressed frustration at the limited scale of the rescue effort. Wallop Jirasiriwatana told the media his emergency medical team felt helpless. “My job is to rescue injured people but that’s not what we’re doing. We’re just finding bodies,” he said. “It looks bad for the government, but there is no coordination. We need a master plan.”

Despite the massive devastation on Thailand’s southern coast, there is no doubt that with an hour’s warning, or even, in some cases at least, as little as 10 minutes, most, if not all of the fatalities could have been avoided. Graphic media reports make clear that many survivors were able to save themselves, once they became aware of the danger, by simply outrunning the incoming surge, or by getting to higher ground.

The complete absence of any warning is likely to become the most critical political issue for the Thaksin government. On Tuesday the prime minister refused to answer journalists’ questions about tsunami alerts.

Nevertheless, the fact is that international warnings were available to Thai government officials about the massive earthquake in Sumatra soon after it occurred. Thailand is one of the 26 nations connected to the Honolulu-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre, which issued the warning.

Thai Meteorological Department officers, who were attending a seminar, convened an emergency meeting chaired by the department’s director-general, Supharerk Tansrirat-tanawong. At that time they knew that the quake measured at least 8.1 on the Richter scale, a huge eruption by any standard.

Like meteorology experts elsewhere, the Thais’ understanding of the event was limited by the fact that there were no sensor devices in the Indian Ocean area to measure currents and changes in water levels. These are necessary to detect a tsunami and predict its course. But they were aware of the possibility of a tsunami developing.

A report in the *Nation* on Tuesday indicates that the threat to the south was recognised at the meeting, despite the lack of full information. “But sources said they did discuss the likelihood that a tsunami could hit Thailand’s Andaman Sea coastal towns. This was also played down,” the newspaper alleges.

The report quotes an official who attended the meeting saying that the decision not to issue a warning was motivated by the wish not to upset the tourist industry. “The very important factor in making the decision was that it’s high [tourist] season and hotel rooms were nearly 100 percent full. If we issued a warning, which would have led to evacuation, [and if nothing happened], what would happen then? Business would be instantaneously affected. It would be beyond the Meteorological Department’s ability to handle. We could go under if [the tsunami] didn’t come. We hesitated for a while whether we should issue a warning or not. It was discussed but we didn’t have a chance to do it.”

There is little doubt that this damning admission reflects, at least indirectly, the priorities of the Thaksin regime. During the first outbreak of the bird flu epidemic, the government did everything it could to protect the powerful Thai business interests involved in the poultry industry by initially concealing the extent of the outbreak. It then announced the crisis was over before any long-term measures were taken to deal with it.

At this stage, it is not clear whether Thaksin or his cabinet ministers were involved in the decision to refrain from issuing a warning. It is more than likely, however, that the government will do everything it can to ensure that no further information on the issue comes to light.

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