

Thai government puts tourism ahead of the poor in tsunami relief effort

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In the wake of the December 26 tsunami, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawarta has focused his government's efforts on restoring the lucrative tourist industry, which contributes 6 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product. The suffering of those who have lost friends and family members, together with the plight of villagers who have lost their homes and possessions, has been relegated to second place.

As of last week, Thai officials reported that 5,305 people had been killed by the tsunami. Of these 1,792 were Thais and 1,329 were foreigners—the national origin of the remaining 2,516 is uncertain. In addition, between 3,500 and 3,600 people were still listed as missing, about one third of whom were foreigners. The province of Phangnga, where over 4,000 bodies have been recovered, was the hardest hit. The number of homeless is not clear but runs into the thousands.

International pressure, particularly from Europe, has forced the exhumation of about 800 bodies to determine if any foreign nationals were mistakenly buried in the mass graves. The Interior Ministry has now admitted that the initial examination of some 2,000 corpses was unreliable. The exhumed bodies will be stored in refrigerated containers awaiting detailed forensic examination.

While a number of factors contributed to the hasty burials, the government's determination to revive tourism was clearly a consideration. The very fact that the bodies of foreign nationals were kept for identification, while those of Thais were consigned to mass graves indicates the preoccupation in official circles with rebuilding Thailand's international image.

Thaksin personally visited resorts to reassure tourists and to encourage them to continue their holidays. He told them that if necessary Thailand itself would set up a tsunami warning system so tourists could feel safe. Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai told the media that such a system was crucial to restoring confidence and bringing tourists back to Thailand and the region.

Government officials and business leaders have already

mapped out a recovery plan designed to rebuild resorts in two to three months. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) estimates that the economy is losing 4 billion baht (about \$US100 million) per month and is keen to restore full capacity.

Unlike neighbouring villages and shantytowns, major hotels and other tourist facilities remain substantially intact. In Phuket, 17,847 of 33,585 hotel rooms are still functional. In hard-hit Phangnga, the figure is 1,023 out of 6,369. While damage to resorts is estimated at 39 billion baht, TAT reported that 60 percent of hotels in the affected areas are operating normally.

The Thai government is hoping to cash in on international sympathy by encouraging tourists to come to, or stay in, Thailand as a means of helping the tsunami victims. Any profits will of course be reaped by the hotel chains and tourist operators. Very little will trickle down to workers and villagers who have lost everything in the disaster.

TAT has asked for a 50 percent increase in its marketing budget to boost tourist numbers. A "Save Andaman" campaign will be featured at the world's largest tourist exhibition, the International Tourismus Borse, in Berlin in March. According to the *Bangkok Post*, TAT will also conduct "roadshows" in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan to deliver condolences to the families of victims and to tout for business.

The *Post* reported that in Phuket "land planners, tourist operators and property owners are hoping to transform crisis into opportunity by rethinking development priorities along Phuket's beaches". A TAT pilot project at Patong beach in Phuket will enforce new building and zoning regulations that will inevitably exclude many of the poorer residents.

TAT governor Juthamas Siriwan declared that the tsunami might be of long-term benefit. "Although we lost many lives and much property in the disaster, the tragic event has brought some good things as it has swept away all the garbage and some parts of the Andaman Sea around Phuket are the clearest they have been in 20 years," she said.

Investors are already looking to cash in on a potential

property boom. Owners at the resort of Khao Kak told the *Nation* newspaper that real estate agents from Bangkok representing foreign buyers were seeking to snap up bargains with offers that were down 75 percent on last year's prices.

Forgotten villages

The devastated villages and fishing communities along the Thai coastline have been all but forgotten.

Much of the destruction is directly related to the clearing of mangroves to make way for the tourist resorts and large-scale prawn farming. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* pointed out that Thai mangrove forests, which acted as a natural barrier to tidal surges, have been halved in area between 1975 and 1993.

US academic Edward Barber told the newspaper that the fishing villages "lose twice" in this process. Forced off sites wanted by real estate developers, fishing families have to relocate their flimsy homes to more vulnerable locations.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted: "While much attention was drawn to the devastated resorts of Khao Lak, where tourists died, few focused on a thriving village that has been nearly wiped off the map. It is thought at least 1,000 people died—some estimates put the toll at double that, in part because no one is sure how many Burmese immigrants worked on the boats."

In the Phangnga district of Takua Pa, the catch has dropped to 10 percent of the level prior to the disaster. The district's three major fishing communities were virtually wiped out. The tsunami destroyed 500 coastal fishing boats, 80 trawlers and 10 fishing piers.

The government has offered 20,000 baht (about \$US500) to the owners of small craft and 200,000 baht to those who lost large vessels. The assistance is just a fraction of the replacement costs. According to the *Bangkok Post*, such boats were worth 80,000 and one million baht respectively.

Government compensation for the loss of family members is even smaller: 25,000 baht if the deceased was a breadwinner, 15,000 baht for other deaths and 2,000 baht for the injured.

The *Bangkok Post* described a scene in the Takua Pa district of Phangnga province last Wednesday where 600 families lined up in the hot sun. Ten people had to be treated for heat exhaustion while they queued for aid payments from two private organisations.

Chirasak Kengkiao, who lost his four-month-old son and his business, told the *Post*: "Everything is gone. Now I have

only my life and a few clothes. I had only purchased the rental car last year. Now I've sold it for scrap." He explained that, with the money he received from the government and private foundations, he could only afford to build a small hut in which to live.

Saowanee Sathaworn, from Baan Namkem, one of the worst hit villages in Thailand, lost her mother and niece. She told the newspaper that officials had informed her that she would receive state grants only after her family members had been declared lost for 120 days. "How am I to survive the next four months without any help from the state at all?" she asked.

While local Thai villagers have received some assistance, immigrant workers, many of whom come from neighbouring Burma, have been completely ignored.

An Associated Press article noted that thousands of Burmese immigrants were working in the Phang Nga area on construction sites and fishing boats at the time of the tsunami. The Thai Labour Ministry had 5,139 Burmese workers registered but many more illegal immigrants were probably working in the area. Their fate is unknown.

World Vision aid worker Somyos Leetrakul told Associated Press: "There has been no publicity at all about Burmese workers. They have been totally forgotten." Many were living in makeshift shacks near building sites or in Ban Nam Khem village, which was destroyed. Somyos said he had found 500 survivors who fled to the hills and were in desperate need of medical attention, food and water.

The disaster that hit Thailand on December 26 has highlighted the social gulf between rich and poor. Every effort is being made to get the corporate operators in the tourist industry back on their feet. But those who have been hit the hardest and are least able to look after themselves have been given little or nothing.



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