

Scandinavian governments criticised for poor tsunami response

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With 52 of its citizens confirmed dead and over 532 still missing Sweden is, proportionately, the European country worst affected by the December 26 Asian tsunami.

Some 20,000 Swedes were in the region when the disaster struck and initial fears of the losses were as high as 3,500. Smaller numbers of tourists from neighbouring Norway, Finland and Denmark were also present, with over 1,000 initially feared dead. To date, 19 Norwegians, seven Danes and five Finns have been confirmed dead. Sixty-seven Norwegians, 62 Danes and 186 Finns remain missing.

For Sweden, the disaster has been particularly traumatic and has caused the highest loss of life in a single event within living memory. Unlike its neighbours, Sweden avoided Nazi invasion in the Second World War and has kept clear of armed conflict for 200 years, save its recent despatch of troops to patrol the Balkans for the European Union.

This, and the vast suffering of the local populations of the Indian Ocean region, has led to the social democratic (SAP) government of Goran Persson being widely criticised for its late and inadequate response to the tragedy.

Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds has been especially singled out because, in an attitude reminiscent of the contempt shown by US President George W. Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair to the immense human tragedy, Freivalds went to the theatre, not returning to her post for 30 hours, while news explaining the catastrophic scale of events flooded in.

One source of frantic reports was apparently the Swedish embassy in Indonesia. Despite this, very little useful news emerged from the Foreign Ministry for the many thousands of people fearing for their loved ones, and no emergency teams were sent to the region for

days.

A poll carried out in early January suggested that 50 percent of respondents wanted Freivalds to resign.

Even the Swedish king, Carl XVI Gustav, normally silent on the conduct of the government, felt compelled to go on television to criticise the lack of information being released. Later, in a memorial service for the disaster's victims, Gustav sought to spread a pall of general bafflement over events, including the government's dereliction. "I wish I had a good answer ... that I, like the kings in the fairytales could make everything right (and bring about) a happy ending ... but I am just like you.... We are all just humans without clear answers."

Sections of the Swedish elite have recognised that the Persson government's reaction was dangerously out of kilter with the shocked and empathetic response of millions of Swedes. The Stockholm police chief warned that should Freivalds appear in the city's Sergels Square "lots of people would want to have a word with her." Swedish police assigned bodyguards to the foreign minister, whose predecessor, Anna Lindh, was stabbed to death in a Stockholm department store in 2003.

Furthermore, there were worries that the government's obvious lack of effort was damaging the country's international credentials. Throughout the postwar period, Sweden worked to overcome its military and geopolitical weakness by exploiting its "neutral" status during the Cold War and promoting its economic interests under the guise of humanitarianism. To this day Sweden, with the other Scandinavian countries, tops the league of percentage state spending on overseas aid.

Duly warned, Persson moved into "statesman" mode and set up a commission to investigate the slow

response, while the Constitutional Committee will investigate the lack of information handed to the king.

The Norwegian government, led by Christian Democrat Kjell Bondevik, has been similarly criticised by survivors, relatives, tour operators, researchers and the media for failing to cope with the crisis. Returning survivors complained that the government had done nothing to help them return home, and had provided no information on who was alive or dead. The newspaper *Dagsavisen* quoted aid agencies as describing the Norwegian response as lukewarm and late.

Despite an immediate offer from the Norwegian Air Ambulance service to despatch three planes, and 10 doctors and nurses, the government did not respond for three days. Even the police criticised the foreign ministry, after police offers of help in compiling lists of dead and missing fell foul of interdepartmental feuding.

The government was also rebuked for its lack of assistance to Sri Lanka, where the Norwegian government has long brokered negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers.

In Finland, the foreign ministry has come under fire for several days of complacency, during which time the scale of the disaster's impact on Finnish citizens was underplayed and urgent eyewitness reports ignored. The head of news and current affairs of the Finnish Broadcasting Company warned: "Information from the authorities has never been the whole truth, but in future we shall almost certainly be giving greater weight to such things as SMS messages and to unofficial channels of information such as the Internet." An investigation to restore confidence in the government has been launched by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari.

By January 17, Persson and the heads of government of Norway and Finland arrived in Thailand to lecture the Thai government on its failure to respond to the tsunami, with Persson asking, "The earthquake came a long time before the tsunami ... Why wasn't there a warning? Who was responsible for that?"

Continuing on his high horse, Persson issued an official recommendation that no Swede should travel to the region until a tsunami early warning system was in place.

The three prime ministers also insisted that the rebuilding of Thailand's resorts and hotels be done to higher standards. No general comment was made on the

primitive building techniques and lack of infrastructure across the region which contributed so much to the huge death toll. So far as Persson, Bondevik and Finnish premier Matti Vanhanen are concerned, only Scandinavian tourists, and tour operators, should expect improvements.



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