

# Aid workers in desperate struggle

## Hopes fading of finding thousands still missing

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**(CNN) -- Relief workers are struggling to reach areas cut off by last week's Indian Ocean tsunamis, as the death toll mounts and hope of finding thousands of missing people fades.**

The destruction brought by the December 26 earthquake and flooding has hampered, and in some cases prevented, delivering food and other supplies.

"Nowhere do we have the kind of problems that we're seeing in Sumatra and Aceh," Jan Egeland, the U.N.'s emergency relief coordinator, said Monday.

"We have not yet fully grasped that this was the epicenter of the catastrophe," he said.

The 9.0 magnitude quake, the strongest since 1964, has been followed by dozens of aftershocks.

In Indonesia, the largest number of deaths were reported on the west coast of Aceh province on the island of Sumatra -- closest to the epicenter of the initial quake.

"The coast is low, it takes the full blast of the tsunami which was at its highest at that point, and now the villages are gone," Egeland said.

"They had hardly any roads at all and now they are gone."

More armed forces and aid workers have arrived at the provincial capital, Banda Aceh, and then advancing into the province's more remote areas, he said. ([Mike Chinoy on the scene](#))

The death toll from Malaysia to East Africa has climbed to nearly 155,000, after Indonesia's toll was raised to more than 94,000 by the country's health ministry on Monday.

Tens of thousands are still missing --including many tourists -- in the aftermath of the disaster that struck a dozen countries.

Governments around the globe have offered more than \$2 billion in aid to the countries hit by the disaster.

Japan is the largest contributor, pledging \$500 million; the United States was second, with \$350 million committed. (Contributions by country)

Michael Elmquist, a deputy to the head of the U.N.'s Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said: "It's the greatest and biggest aid effort in the world, a scale never tried before."

He said 50 tons of food already had been distributed throughout the province.

Another 400 tons of food has arrived in Banda Aceh, he said, while 12,500 tons were waiting on docks along the east coast of Sumatra.

Elmquist said the food is enough to feed everyone in the province for six to eight weeks.

But relief planners are still struggling to get the supplies from the east coast to the island's west coast.

Nothing remained of the bridge connecting Banda Aceh and the west coast -- just 160 kilometers (100 miles) from the epicenter -- except the low pillars that once held the roadway.

An Indonesian army garrison at the bridge was devastated -- of the 270 soldiers and their families stationed there, only 12 people survived.

Where there were survivors, they swarmed military helicopters -- the only transportation that could reach most of the areas -- bringing packages of food, water and medical supplies.

India's navy launched its largest relief operation, part of a \$25 million effort to help Sri Lanka, where more than 47,062 people are dead and more than 16,000 others are missing.

Eleven Indian ships were dispatched to the island nation and military helicopters also ferried in relief supplies.

Already, India has delivered six ton of supplies to the tsunami-hit areas and plans to ship in 20 ton more.

In addition to relief supplies, India is sending engineers and skilled workers to help rebuild Sri Lanka's devastated economy.

India itself was hit hard by the tsunami, with at least 9,400 people dead, most on its east coast and in the remote Andaman and Nicobar Islands, closer to Thailand and Indonesia than their mother country.

Madhusree Mukerjee, an Indonesian journalist and expert on the indigenous peoples of the islands, said the Andamans -- the northernmost of the islands -- "suffered property damage but little loss of life."

"The real devastation is in the Nicobar Islands," she told CNN.

Indian officials report more than 5,600 people missing on the islands.

Mukerjee said the population of the Nicobar Islands is about 45,000 and the tsunamis "washed over many of the Nicobar Islands many times."

In one, Car Nicobar, which is also home to an Indian Air Force base, "we have been told all 15 villages have been washed out," she said.

Mukerjee said the Indian government -- which declined international aid, saying it could handle the emergency itself -- was doing as good a job as could be expected.

But she said Andaman and Nicobar could have benefited from assistance from the much closer Thailand, which also declined international financial aid.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra told CNN that his country did not need financial help but was appreciative of expertise and equipment -- especially forensics expertise.

"We have never had anything like this," he said, "and it is getting harder to identify corpses."

Shinawatra said he was pleased to see cooperation between the private and public sectors -- and how fast the area "came back to normal activity."

Owners of hotels that survived the tsunami in Phuket, for example, are encouraging vacationers to return -- and some are. The owners say the return of the tourists is essential to their survival.

Some 70 percent of the hotels' reservations have cancelled, officials said.

But CNN's Aneesh Raman said the juxtaposition of tourists on the beach where thousands died a week ago was odd, as was watching relatively normal beach activities while knowing hundreds of thousands elsewhere were in desperate need of aid.

Meanwhile, Annan, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and other world leaders are to meet Thursday in Jakarta at a donor conference of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to compare notes on the disaster.

Powell and President George W. Bush's brother, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, arrived Monday in Bangkok to start a visit to the region that would include Phuket, Aceh and Sri Lanka. ([Full story](#))

Annan is expected to visit some of the tsunami-battered area after the Jakarta conference as well.

The initial billions of aid will take care of stabilization and life-saving efforts. Beyond that is the long reconstruction effort, and potentially tens of billions more -- and as much as a decade longer.

Such financial needs will need to come from all sectors, and in the United States, President George W. Bush called together two former presidents -- his father, George H.W. Bush, and his predecessor in the office, Bill Clinton -- to head up an effort to convince businesses to give more to the effort.

With the two ex-presidents by his side, Bush asked "every American to contribute as they are able." ([Full story](#))

-- *CNN Correspondents Mike Chinoy and Atika Shubert in Indonesia; Paula Hancocks in Sri Lanka; and Aneesh Raman in Phuket, Thailand, contributed to this report.*

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